



The PRICE of FRIENDSHIP
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by

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THE PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP

Spock watched Captain Kirk being taken to the intensive care unit of the hospital on Starbase 3, his impassive features hiding any concern he might have felt. Dr. McCoy's voice sounded strained, but reassuring.

"He will be all right, Spock, but not yet, though, not for quite a while!" He followed his patient and Spock went back to the bridge to hear Uhura say,

"Message for you, sir. You are to beam down to Starbase 3 and see a Captain Laung, Administrative Officer, who will give you the next orders for the Enterprise."

"I thought the normal procedure was to see the Commanding Officer - in this instance Commodore Maynard."

"You may see him, sir. I queried this and was told that Commodore Maynard was expected back shortly."

The First Officer called Mr. Scott to the bridge and said in his usual calm and unhurried tone, "Take command, Mr. Scott, and maintain orbit. When will repairs be completed?"

"Approximately two hours, sir. I can't be more precise," he added at Spock's raised eyebrows, "but damage was not extensive, in material, that is. When I think that those Klingon fiends are responsible for the Captain's injuries during that space battle, I could strangle them slowly with my bare hands!"

"Quite illogical, Mr. Scott, you could never strangle that number of aliens with only two hands."

The Chief Engineer shrugged and watched Spock leave the bridge with a sigh. Talking to a Vulcan was rather like taking a cold shower!

* * * *

Spock duly received the next orders concerning the Enterprise and discussed the details with Captain Laung, when an officer came in with a new tape from Starfleet. The Administrative Officer ran it through quickly, then called Spock.

"This may be of interest to you, Commander."

The Vulcan looked at the screen, but made no comment, and Captain Laung, disappointed, took the tape out and answered his intercom, then said, "Commodore Maynard is back, and as I am due to go on leave, I have to see to handing over to my second in command as well as deliver those three new tapes to the Commodore, so I hope you will understand if I cut this interview short, Commander."

"Yes, sir. May I be of assistance and deliver those tapes? I should see Commodore Maynard as a matter of courtesy."

The Administrative Officer agreed eagerly and after a few more exchanges with Spock, handed over the tapes and said, "Thank you, Commander, and good luck on your mission."

* * * *

Spock was then granted an interview with Commodore Maynard and handed over the tape he was carrying.

"Thank you, Commander," said Maynard in his usual brusque manner. "I see that the Enterprise's mission is observation of a black sun, with new scientific equipment which, it is hoped, will give us more data on that particular phenomenon. Any queries?"

"No, sir, but there is one other matter I have to bring up. I wish to make a formal application for Captaincy of the Enterprise, as is allowed under Regulation... "

"Yes, yes. What happened to Kirk?"

Spock explained briefly and Commodore Maynard looked at him with a distaste the Vulcan sustained with indifference.

"Very well, Commander, make your application. The answer from Starfleet should be here in about one hour. Come back then."

The First Officer saw to the beaming of the new equipment and other formalities and went back to the Commodore's office at the required time. The Commanding Officer smiled at him and said genially,

"Congratulations, Commander, your application has been approved. You were obviously overdue for promotion, and perhaps overlooked in the past, so I can understand why you seized the opportunity. Your record is impressive and you deserve the promotion."

"Thank you, sir."

"You must be pleased, at least if Vulcans... never mind, I heard that you were the best First Officer in the Fleet, so you shouldn't have any difficulty in passing the command test. You are aware that the mission becomes a command test, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Silly new Regulation in my opinion! But you know how it came about after that newly-promoted Captain became power-mad. It was later discovered that he had been affected by some alien bug, but apparently the tendency was there, according to the clever doctors, so Starfleet is taking no chances."

"Perhaps a wise precaution, sir."

"Maybe. Anyway the Enterprise officers and crew know you and you should encounter no difficulty. I am sure Dr. McCoy will give you an excellent report, both on yourself and on your command."

"Dr. McCoy is very predictable, sir, and can be relied on to co-operate."

"Good. You are of course entitled to wear Captain's uniform from now on."

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Good luck on your command test, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

* * * *

Spock went on to the hospital and was allowed to see his Captain for only five minutes. Kirk's features were pale and exhausted, but he managed a smile.

"Thank you for coming, Spock, I wanted to wish you luck."

Had Kirk been his usual self, he would have noticed the sudden tension in his First Officer, but he had been pumped full of too many drugs to be alert, and Spock's voice was as calm as usual when he asked, "Luck, sir?"

"Your command test, of course! McCoy told me the rumour that you were on a command test, and I am sure Bones will give you an excellent report."

"I can rely on Dr. McCoy to do what is expected of him," replied Spock.

"We'll miss you, Spock, but it would be selfish of me not to wish you success. Take care of the Enterprise for me, there's no officer I would feel happier to entrust her to than you, but please bring her back in one piece; I don't want to be stuck here for ever!"

"How long are you expected to stay here, Captain?"

"The doctors don't know yet, but I should be fit by the time you get back in any case. I shall probably be sent to that ghastly convalescent home after this hospital, and only the prospect of sitting in my command chair again in the near future will keep me sane."

A doctor entered to signal that the visit was over and Kirk smiled. "Even if you don't believe in it, good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

Spock left and Kirk tried to sleep, but felt a slight uneasiness. He had sensed something in Spock, but even though he knew his First Officer well by now, there were still times when he could not read the expressionless features of the Vulcan. Ill as he was, he could not rely on his senses or intuition and pushed the thought away. He also refused to think of the Enterprise bridge without Spock; this would have to be faced when he was better, and sleep at the moment was the quickest way of getting back to his ship, not worries, imaginary or otherwise.

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Spock beamed back aboard the Enterprise wearing his new Captain's uniform, and was met by a cordial McCoy. "Spock, I heard all about it! You're getting the Captaincy of another Starship as soon as Jim's back - congratulations!"

"Your information, Doctor, is inaccurate. Strange as it may seem, however, inaccuracy sometimes has its uses."

"What are you talking about? Is this next mission not a command test, then?"

"Yes, Doctor, it is - for the command of the Enterprise."

He ignored the shocked incredulity on the Medical Officer's face and went to the bridge where he sat down in the command chair and opened all channels to the ship, then announced in his usual calm and matter-of-fact voice,

"This is the Captain speaking. As you may or may not know, this mission is to proceed under my command, a command which will become permanent in the near future. During this brief period of transition, I intend to bring the personnel of this ship up to the peak of efficiency I require, and I expect an immediate response to my orders. That is all." He put the controls back into position and continued, "Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu."

The navigator was too shocked to register the order, but an icy voice soon shook him up. "Mr. Sulu, I gave you a clear and definite order. If you suffer from intermittent deafness, please report to Dr. McCoy for treatment and leave your post to an officer endowed with normal hearing."

Mr. Sulu accomplished the necessary manoeuvres quickly as Spock continued, "Our destination is the Epsilon Apodis system. I have plotted a course you will check and execute, Mr. Chekov."

"Yes, sir," answered a dazed ensign.

"And I expect absolute accuracy in your calculations, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Spock got up and went to stand near the navigator. "I do hope your deafness will not recur. It would be most unfortunate if it did - for you, that is."

The Vulcan went to his post as Sulu visibly shivered. That icy stare and the tone of quiet menace was enough to give him goose pimples, apart from making him feel very inadequate. Spock was now working at his computer, and Chekov was trying to stop his hands from shaking; he knew he was bound to make mistakes in those calculations!

"Cossak!" he muttered under his breath.

"Mr. Chekov," said Spock's voice, the more deadly because of its quietness, "that term you used refers to a Russian horseman, am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you please tell me the connection between a Russian horseman and our course to the Epsilon Apodis system."

"I... that is... There is none, sir," stammered Chekov.

"Then explain." The hard voice lashed like a whip and the poor ensign visibly trembled and looked around him desperately for inspiration.

"Perhaps you were thinking of your great great grandfather," said Sulu seriously, getting his revenge for Russian boasting.

"Yes, I was!" said Chekov, not without a black look at the navigator.

"Fascinating as it may be that your great great grandfather was a Cossack," said Spock, "is this a suitable time to think about family matters, Mr. Chekov?"

"No, sir."

"Don't let it happen again. Let me have your calculations in exactly thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir," said the ensign, wiping his forehead with a shaking hand.

Spock went back to the command chair and opened the channel to Engineering. "Mr. Scott, your engines were slow taking us out of orbit. Please rectify the malfunction."

"What malfunction, sir? There was none, a time of adjustment is necessary before... "

"Illogical, Mr. Scott. No time of adjustment is necessary if you have the power taped and ready for my order."

"But sir... "

"Any logical process of thought should have told you that our departure was imminent and it was up to you to be ready. In cases such as this, Mr. Scott, I expect my orders anticipated."

"Sir, some strain on the engines could occur... "

"It is your problem to see that it does not, and none of my concern. Don't let such an occurrence happen again, Mr. Scott; a most inefficient performance."

"We're not telepathic, Captain," said an outraged Chief Engineer, "And can't... "

"A great misfortune, perhaps, Mr. Scott, but irrelevant. I am on my way to your department for an inspection, after which I shall expect full assistance in the setting up of the scientific equipment."

"Captain," protested the Scotsman, "an inspection is never done so soon after departure, we've been working hard and... "

"Regulation 17, paragraph 5 stipulates that you have to be ready at any time the Commanding Officer may choose. I am on my way."

The new Captain left the bridge, to the relief of the officers there, while the Chief Engineer swore profusely and alerted his section.

* * * *

When the Captain came back to the bridge, tension became tangible, and Uhura herself saw Spock approach her with some apprehension.

"Please send that message to Starbase 3 Science Research Centre, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Should it be in code?"

"Don't you know?"

"We only use code for Starfleet communications, sir."

"Is this a civilian vessel?"

"No, sir."

"You do know that the Enterprise is a Starfleet vessel, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then code should be used, we are under Starfleet orders - and I fail to see why it took twenty seconds to settle a matter which should have been settled in ten seconds at most. Your efficiency is seriously under par, Lieutenant, and will be over looked this once only."

* * * *

It was not long before Dr. McCoy started to get several very angry officers rushing into his surgery, and it was a Chief Engineer boiling with rage who appeared first. "What's the matter with that tin-pot dictator? We have to obey orders before he gives them now! And would you believe that he managed to find seven faults during his inspection and I've actually been told that I run an inefficient section! Wretched Vulcan Sassenach..."

McCoy might have laughed at the incongruous expression had he felt in the mood, but he was very upset himself. "Calm down, Scotty, and let me tell you..."

"I can't calm down, Doctor! Do you know he actually reduced two of my lads to tears? And dared criticise my engines? I didn't think power went to Vulcans' heads, but he has flipped!"

"Stop it a minute, will you? and look at this on my screen! It gives me the horrors - please tell me I'm seeing things and that it's not there!"

The Chief Engineer noticed at last that McCoy was staring at a screen as though faced with some indescribable and awful menace. Mr. Scott saw Spock's application for command and exclaimed, "I don't believe it!"

"I didn't either, but the reply from Starfleet is genuine. Spock is to get the Enterprise after this mission."

"What about Captain Kirk?"

"I don't know! Jim is unfit for anything at the moment anyway, so he's not our immediate worry, but that egomaniac up there is! And yet when I disregard the evidence, I would have sworn Spock incapable of taking advantage of Jim's enforced absence to take his command away, and he always said he didn't want it."

"If the Captain knows, he'll never recover from the shock, in his poor state of health."

"Let's hope he doesn't know!" said McCoy fervently.

Chekov burst in then, practically in tears. "Please, Doctor, give me something to keep me awake."

"Why?"

"I have to finish those calculations during my off-duty time, and I'm so tired..."

"But you should have done them on duty! What are you talking about?"

"I didn't get them accurate enough for his lordship, and have to find the error."

"If those calculations are for our course, you're late, lad," said Scotty.

"He did them himself long ago, of course, and told me in no uncertain terms that if everyone was as inefficient as myself, we would still be in orbit around Starbase 3. I've only got the last two decimals wrong, but it's not good enough!"

"Go and rest," said McCoy, "in your state you could never work."

"I could never face him if it were not done," said Chekov with real anguish.

"I take the responsibility," said the Doctor.

After having heard many other complaints, among them Sulu's and Uhura's, McCoy said resolutely, "I'm going to have it out with Spock, and get under that mask of his if I can."

"Best of luck, Doctor, better you than me!" said Mr. Scott.

The Chief Engineer left, and McCoy called the bridge. "Captain, I would like to see you in my quarters at once, please."

"Indeed, Doctor? Why?"

"I will explain here."

"Doctor," said Spock in a tone of insulting patience, "if there is an emergency, it is your duty to inform me at once so that I can take steps to remedy it."

"There is no immediate emergency," replied an angry McCoy, "but I must see you."

"In my quarters, in one hour, when I shall be off duty. Captain out."

"You pointed-eared freak," shouted McCoy to no-one in particular. "If you think I shall be less angry by then..."

He paced his surgery feverishly, trying to think what, if anything, was at the back of Spock's actions, but could discover no reason, logical or otherwise.

* * * *

He had sat wearily down, discouraged and frustrated, when he was startled by the intercom.

"Dr. McCoy," said the well-known cold voice, "I said one hour, in my quarters. As you requested the interview, punctuality would seem logical to expect, yet you are already one minute and thirty seconds late."

McCoy rushed out to Spock's cabin, only to find it empty and deserted. Puzzled at first, truth dawned on him and he ran to Captain Kirk's quarters with new fuel added to his anger.

"Three minutes late, Doctor," said Spock before he could speak. "I deduce from this that no serious emergency can exist, except perhaps in your mind."

"You couldn't wait, could you?" said McCoy in a strangled voice.

"Wait, Doctor? I did wait, for three minutes."

"You know very well what I mean, Spock. You could not wait to settle in Jim's cabin, and most of his things still here! How could you?"

There was real pain on McCoy's face, but the new Captain's features betrayed nothing. The Doctor mastered his emotion with difficulty, but master it he did. He had to keep a clear head. "Spock, why?"

"Specify, Doctor. Your mind cannot be so vague that you cannot ask a clear question."

"You're trying to make me angry, aren't you? A strange tactic for someone whose command depends largely on my report! Or don't you want the command?" added the Doctor with a start, looking at the Vulcan piercingly.

But the dark eyes under slanting eyebrows remained steady and not one muscle moved in the cold and impassive mask as Spock asked,

"Is it a habit of mine to behave illogically, Doctor?"

"No."

"Then where would be the logic in applying for a command I did not want? Where would be the logic in staying in my old quarters when I am in fact Captain of this vessel?"

"But you always said you didn't want to be Captain!"

"Life, events, situations, people, change all the time, Doctor, nothing remains static. I do not escape that law any more than you or anyone else."

"But why now? I don't like it."

"Isn't it logical to apply for Captaincy of a vessel without a Captain? Whether you like it or not is irrelevant, Doctor, I am the Captain of the Enterprise."

"Perhaps not for long! The crew is not reacting favourably to the change, and you aren't making it easy for anyone. Why?"

"As logic is missing from your mind pattern, Doctor, I have to explain in simple words. I want command of this vessel on my own terms, that is, I want a ship with a crew as efficient as I can make it. I intend to start my command as I want it to be in the future."

"But surely you don't have to antagonise everyone in the process!"

"Doctor, once and for all I will command my ship as I see fit, and make it an efficient unit if possible. The means are not important."

"They are when they drive men to limits of endurance. Scotty told me that two of his men were reduced to tears, and what about Chekov? I sent him to rest, and he will not get those calculations done."

"I will not tolerate excuses from duty or orders unless on specific and genuine medical grounds, Doctor, and you will not pamper the crew as you did in the past. Or would you have me believe that Earth people are fragile beings without the necessary stamina to submit to discipline? I am well aware that their lack of logic is a serious impediment to... "

"All right, all right! Don't say I didn't warn you when they start hating your guts, though!"

"Irrelevant. I require efficiency, not emotion. Any other questions?"

"What will happen to Jim? Have you thought about that?"

Spock's eyebrows lifted and he replied coldly, "Starfleet did not have to take my application into consideration, Doctor."

"No, I suppose not, and the Enterprise couldn't remain inactive while Jim recovered. I expect they will give him another ship. If the crew must have another Captain, I'm sure they would rather have you... "

"Better the devil you know, as I believe the saying goes."

"If you want to put it that way," replied McCoy with a smile. "But you must co-operate and give them time to get used to the change. Don't push them too hard - and don't forget that my report will be a major factor..." McCoy got up to leave, and added, "Do you know, Spock, I never thought you were Human enough to want a command!"

"Really, Doctor, do you have to insult me? There are times when it is perfectly logical to change one's mind."

"Spock... I am accepting for the moment that you do want this command. This mission is therefore important. I will help, and I'm sure the crew will, if you collaborate. It is up to you, and you alone."

"Yes, Doctor," said Spock quietly. "It is, as you put it, up to me."

McCoy thought he sensed something in that tone, but as usual Spock's eyes never faltered under his scrutiny and showed nothing. Shame I can't read that Vulcan like Jim can, thought McCoy as he left with a shrug. We'll just have to

wait and see...

He joined the Chief Engineer in his quarters and said firmly, "We must be patient and give Spock a chance, he can't help it that he's a Vulcan."

"I suppose not," sighed Mr. Scott, "and after thinking it over, I can see that it is logical for him to want to be Captain - even though I think he should not have applied for it."

"Better the devil we know, as Spock himself said."

"Aye, there is something in that, Doctor."

* * * *

As days went by, however, resentment against the new Captain built up. The Vulcan seemed to be everywhere and see everything, and the slightest inefficiency brought such harsh and scathing comments that the receiver felt like disappearing underground to avoid his icy stare. Crew members started to ~~kaap~~ looking over their shoulders with the fear of seeing the dark eyes and hearing the cold and impersonal voice reducing them to trembling jelly. The near-impossible standard of efficiency set by the new Captain never seemed to be achieved, the reprimands were always brief, if deadly, and tension built up gradually but surely.

McCoy started to notice that the new Captain could not possibly either sleep or eat, he was always working and being everywhere. The new scientific equipment had been installed and Spock was testing it and making research into its use, on top of being Captain. But when the Doctor tried to mention food or sleep to Spock, he was firmly rebuked and told that there would be plenty of time for that after the observation of the black sun.

* * * *

They had nearly reached the Epsilon Apodis system when McCoy had a meeting in his surgery with Mr. Scott, Sulu, Chekov and Lt. Uhura.

"Well, how are things?" asked the Doctor.

"I don't care if he is a Vulcan," said Chekov. "I won't put up with him as Captain indefinitely. If he stays, I go. I think I'll go anyway, I'm fed up with being asked if it's true my great great grandfather was a Cossack, and if he was, what does that make me?"

Laughter was general, and Sulu said, "Served you right! You should know better with Vulcan ears about!"

"It was all your fault, and I don't believe you were helping me! Anyway, how is your deafness?"

"I am not deaf!" exclaimed Sulu, "and I won't have..."

"Enough," said McCoy shortly. "Do you also intend to ask for a transfer, Mr. Sulu?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I might. And yet... I don't know..."

"There are times when I could scream," said Uhura, "but my intuition tells me that there is a logical reason somewhere, if only I could think of it!"

"The reason is obvious," said Scotty, "Spock wants this ship efficient for that observation of the black sun. If he brings back outstanding data, it will be a feather in his cap. I do have to admit that this ship is efficient now to a degree I would have thought impossible to achieve, but it is achieved through fear, anger, hurt. I don't think I could live with it for long, either."

McCoy rubbed his forehead tiredly. "I don't know what to think any longer, and as to what kind of report to give...! The problem as I see it is that everyone is starting to hate him, and yet his criticisms are never wholly unjustified, but applied to trifles Jim would never have bothered about. And his comments are

enough to make anyone want to strangle him."

"It's his Vulcan nature," said Scotty. "He's not conscious of how much he hurts people. He points out that this scientific mission is tricky, and will require peak efficiency, which is true, I suppose."

"Let's try logic," said McCoy.

"Do you think you should?" asked Scotty dubiously.

"Don't be cheeky! I thought at first that he was acting this way to fail the command test, but why should he? Anyway, he's too logical to be so crude. It would be too obvious to start so quickly and make us suspicious, so I have to accept that he does want the command. He misses food and sleep to keep the crew up to scratch and has worked as non-stop as he could on the scientific side of the mission. I've tried to talk to him but he ignores me or tells me to do my job and he will do his. I told him that no-one would want to stay under his command and he replied that they were his terms and he would not change them."

"Of course," said Scotty, "he wants such efficiency that Starfleet will have to confirm his rank of Captain."

"At least he's honest about it," said Uhura, "and he didn't have much time to make the crew accept the new standards."

"No, I suppose not," said McCoy. "We'll be at the Epsilon Apodis system soon and once the mission is accomplished, I hope I can see more clearly how to write my report!"

"I wouldn't like to be in your shoes!" said Scotty as they left.

* * * *

Mr. Sulu had just established the orbit around the black sun as prescribed by Starfleet when Spock arrived on the bridge and ordered, "Take us out of here, Mr. Sulu, and establish a new orbit according to the co-ordinates I have fed into your computer."

The navigator, used as he was to obey sharply, nevertheless started, and heard the dreaded voice. "Another case of deafness, Mr. Sulu?"

The order was executed as Mr. Scott protested, "Sir, the gravitational pull of a black sun is tremendous and I don't know if..."

"If you don't know, Mr. Scott," said Spock, "it is highly illogical of you to say anything. Please concentrate on your job and let me do mine."

The Chief Engineer was too worried not to call McCoy and tell him about the new orbit, and the Doctor ran to the bridge. "Captain, what is this?" he exclaimed. "If you want to commit suicide, can't you do it on your own? Do you have to drag all of us with you?"

"An illogical statement, Doctor, as is to be expected from you. On what grounds do you base your assumption that I have suicidal tendencies?"

"This orbit, of course! It's madness, and contrary to orders!"

"A Starship Captain has the option to alter orders to fit circumstances."

"So? What circumstance requires such a near orbit?"

"Observation of a black sun at relatively close range has never been done, Doctor. My calculations prove that it can be accomplished and the Enterprise will obtain pictures and observations never recorded before."

"And for this you risk the ship and crew? Are you so anxious to get this command that you have to attempt the impossible?"

"It is hardly logical to attempt the impossible, Doctor. Your comments are irrelevant and interfering with our work; you will please desist."

"Not until you countermand your order. If you persist in such folly, I



will pronounce you unfit for duty."

"On what grounds, Doctor?"

McCoy spluttered and stepped back as Spock continued, "You have none. How do you know that what I am attempting is impossible? Have you checked my calculations?"

"No, I have not," growled McCoy. "But if anything happens as a result of your foolhardiness, God help you, because I won't!"

* * * *

In spite of their understandable concern at observing such a phenomenon at relatively close quarters (that is, closer quarters than anyone had ever done) the officers on the bridge could not help being fascinated by the view on their large screen, and Spock at his computer station was obviously more than fascinated. McCoy himself could not take his eyes off the black disc surrounded by its halo of shimmering light, and started to relax slightly. Spock after all was a brilliant scientist and knew what he was doing - at least, McCoy sincerely hoped so as he watched the Vulcan check the new scientific equipment already recording data.

It was Mr. Sulu who suddenly noticed and shouted, "Captain, the orbit is decaying!"

"Is it, Mr. Sulu?" asked Spock calmly.

"Yes, sir, we're getting nearer. Shall I correct?"

"Not yet, I am getting fascinating readings."

"But sir, we'll be drawn into... "

"Plenty of time," said Spock. "Another minute will see... "

"Us irremediably lost into that sun!" snapped McCoy.

"Engines are under strain," said Scotty worriedly.

Spock seemed to tear himself away from his scanners with difficulty, and asked in a slightly impatient tone, "What is wrong?"

"You mean you don't know?" asked McCoy unbelievably.

"The orbit is decaying, sir," repeated Sulu.

"Then correct it, Mr. Sulu, since you are all so worried."

"I can't, sir, she won't respond. We're too near... "

"So you've done it, Captain," said McCoy. "Of all the stupid, foolhardy... "

"Doctor, such useless comments are noisy and hardly helpful. Mr. Sulu, I am going to the auxiliary control room; there must be a malfunction somewhere in your controls, but keep trying on manual."

The officers looked after him unbelievably as he left the bridge with no apparent hurry. The navigator kept trying the manual control and was relieved to see that the orbit was corrected at last.

The Chief Engineer went to the command chair and called the Captain. "Sir, orbit re-established, but should we compute another for safety? My engines are under strain, the pull of the sun is enormous."

"Maintain orbit, Mr. Scott. A minor malfunction is no reason to abandon my programme."

"Captain," shouted McCoy, "your place is on the bridge. Why stay in the auxiliary control room?"

"It is quiet and peaceful here, Doctor. I am operating the duplicate scientific equipment and getting fascinating data."

"How can you stay in the same orbit? It's too dangerous and... "

"Maintain orbit. Captain out."

"He's insane!" said McCoy.

"It could have been a minor malfunction as he said, Doctor," said Scotty.
"But I don't like the pull on my engines."

"He should be on the bridge... "

"You know Spock and his fascinating studies. He's still a Science Officer, after all, and probably having the time of his life!"

A little while later, Mr. Sulu said, "Time of observation as ordered by Starfleet is over now. Should we escape orbit, Mr. Scott?"

"Ask the Captain, Mr. Sulu."

The navigator did, and Spock replied, "Give me five minutes, Mr. Sulu, then get out of this orbit, but establish the one prescribed by Starfleet's orders."

Sulu obeyed, and exclaimed, "We can't escape orbit! Captain, we can't escape orbit!"

"I am not deaf, Mr. Sulu. Apply more power."

"I have, sir, with no result."

"Mr. Scott, any more power available?"

"Engines starting to overheat now, sir."

"Keep trying and... "

"Captain," shouted McCoy, "if you don't come to the bridge immediately, I will see you court-martialled!"

"Please keep the intercom free for important communications, Doctor. Mr. Scott, divert all power to engines, allow two seconds, then apply one single maximum thrust for two seconds. Escape velocity will be achieved. Captain out."

His orders were followed worriedly, with no success the first time, but the second try ordered by Mr. Scott nearly succeeded and the third made it. They established the orbit ordered by Starfleet, still too near for the state of the engines according to Mr. Scott, and Dr. McCoy said angrily,

"Go and fetch him, Scotty, with Mr. Sulu. It's time he was reminded that he is Captain."

The two officers went to auxiliary control, and found the Vulcan absorbed in his work, a picture of the black sun on his screen.

"Dr. McCoy wants you on the bridge, sir," said Mr. Scott.

"I was coming anyway," replied Spock calmly as he got up, gripping the arm of his chair, still staring at the black sun, then followed them out.

* * * *

On the bridge, a group of angry officers stared at him as Dr. McCoy asked, "And where have you been, Captain?"

"You know perfectly well, Doctor. Now I must check the automatic recorder, so please be quiet or leave the bridge."

The Doctor stared unbelievably as Spock settled at his station, when the Chief Engineer shouted, "Doctor, quickly, two men have been found injured, power plant!"

They both ran out as Spock called the section in question and was told that both men were thought to be dead. The Vulcan settled back to his work, but was soon interrupted by a surly Chief Engineer and an angry Dr. McCoy, who

said with undisguised venom, "Those two men are dead, Captain. Weren't you interested enough to come?"

"I am not a doctor, so my presence would have been superfluous."

"Do you know how they died?" asked Scotty. "Two of my lads they were, and bright too."

"They died because of the thrust we had to apply to escape your mad orbit," shouted McCoy. "Both were thrown against an iron column and their necks broken."

"A regrettable incident, Doctor. Mr. Scott, all data has been successfully recorded now, we can leave orbit and return to Starbase 3. The course has been plotted and fed into the master computer."

"Thank God for that!" said Scotty. "We'll be away from that black thing."

"Captain," said McCoy more calmly, "this is a serious matter and ... "

"The ship is well clear of any danger now," said Spock.

"Thanks to Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott between them, no thanks to you. You weren't even on the bridge, Captain, and that is the place where you should have been. Your orbit was faulty and dangerous and proved fatal to two men. Your attitude throughout this crisis has been irresponsible, your main interest being the black sun and not the safety of your crew. My report will make all this clear, and your command test has failed. In fact I am relieving you of command as from now; Mr. Scott will take over, and I will recommend a court martial. What do you say to this?"

Spock faced him slowly, his gaze calm and completely unmoved. "There is nothing to say, Doctor. You are within your rights to make your report as you see fit, and act accordingly. Mr. Scott, as temporary commanding officer, may I have your permission to process all the data recorded as well as my own studies so as to present a comprehensive report to Starbase 3 Science Research Centre?"

"Yes, of course, sir," said Scotty. "You are the best qualified officer to do this."

"Thank you. I will of course subsequently confine myself to quarters if you wish, but I had several computer check-ups scheduled before our return, and might as well make myself useful, if you have no objection."

"None, sir."

"You're not going to sabotage the records, are you?" asked McCoy.

The Vulcan turned slowly back to his computer and extracted a couple of tapes. "Here, Doctor, take them. I have no further need to be on the bridge."

"No doubt you will prefer your computers' company to our own!" said McCoy.

"An accurate observation, Doctor," replied Spock with his usual calm. He left his station and walked to the lift so slowly that McCoy exclaimed,

"Are you trying to walk like a computerised robot too?"

"If you meant that as a compliment, Doctor, thank you," said the Vulcan imperturbably, leaving McCoy knowing that he would get no reaction from the impassive mask.

"I must see to my report," said McCoy sombrely. "Lt. Uhura, you'd better send a message to Starfleet that I have suspended the Captain pending possible court martial."

She nodded and Mr. Scott said in a low voice, "You shouldn't have asked him for those tapes, Doctor, Spock would never have tampered with them."

"I know - but if I didn't have them in my hands, I don't think I'd believe this nightmare!"

"And yet two men are dead, and we were lucky to escape that black sun - my engines were overheating badly. I suppose Mr. Spock isn't infallible any more than we are and made a mistake."

"A costly mistake, Scotty. He will not only lose his command, but his place in Starfleet, and he'll be lucky if he's not charged with murder. Dismissal is the least he can expect."

He went to his quarters and the bridge settled to routine in a strange silence. I should have thought we'd have been glad to see the back of him, thought Scotty, bewildered, and yet we all feel uneasy and worried.

* * * *

But the crew soon noticed that Spock was no longer Captain. They could relax at last without an icy voice and cold eyes reducing them to shivers! The officers on the bridge also started to feel the benefit of the Captain's absence, tension disappeared and a more relaxed way of working replaced the high rate of efficiency.

McCoy shut himself in his office and went through all the events since the departure from Starbase 3, then wrote his report, making it as damning as possible. That so-called 'friend' had tried to steal Jim's command, and deserved to pay, and the Chief Engineer also felt the same way and added his own comments as temporary Captain. Now that Spock was no longer on the bridge, the officers had forgotten the strange feeling of unease they had experienced when he left it; their previous liking for him had been erased by his recent typical Vulcan behaviour and exacting demands. Spock now kept to himself and worked mostly in the auxiliary control room, and everyone left him strictly alone.

* * * *

His report completed, Dr. McCoy took it to the Vulcan who went through it without moving a muscle, then gave it back silently. He was now showing signs of tiredness, but his eyes remained calm under the Doctor's uneasy scrutiny, even serene, a serenity which seemed impervious to anyone or anything. McCoy felt momentarily confused and a twinge of pity made him say,

"Spock, for old time's sake, this is my advice. Admit your mistake, and Starfleet will go easy on you. Tell them you realise you made an error and learnt your lesson, and that it will not happen again."

"I certainly will not adopt such a childish attitude, Doctor, and I could not tell such lies."

"What lies?"

"Given the same circumstances and the same situation, I would act as I have already done."

"In spite of two men dead?"

"It was an accident, and accidents... "

"In other words you will not admit that you were wrong! This is no time for pride, Spock, not when your career is at stake!"

"Doctor, whatever I may have to surrender in the near future will never make me surrender my own dignity."

"A dignity which made you apply for Jim's command? I'm glad I don't understand that kind of dignity, Spock."

He left in anger, and did not hear the Vulcan whisper,

"So am I, Doctor - so am I."

* * * *

The Chief Medical Officer had had his report transmitted to Starbase 3 and Uhura informed him that Commodore Maynard was calling and wanted Mr. Scott

present as well as himself, so McCoy summons the Chief Engineer and they took the call in the sickbay where the Commodore said somberly, "A very disturbing report, Doctor. Are you sure of your facts?"

"Yes, sir. I have computer tapes to prove them."

"I see. I have sent a copy to Starfleet of course, and have been informed that a court martial is in order. This will have far-reaching repercussions! It's not often that a new Captain gets court-martialled, I'm happy to say! Commodore Mendez was very upset, as he was the officer who approved Commander Spock's application, and he will now be hauled in front of the Admiral as soon as the latter is back from leave."

"I can imagine the way he feels!" said McCoy.

"That is his worry, fortunately! Please inform Captain Spock that he is at liberty to appoint a defending counsel now. In view of his past record, I am sure Captain Arney would come from Starfleet if asked to. Otherwise two of my officers are available - either would accept, I am sure."

"I'll inform the Captain, sir," said McCoy. "Any chance we'll get Captain Kirk back?"

"Highly unlikely, Doctor; Kirk is still here at the convalescent home, but his next assignment is bound to have been decided on, even if I have not been informed yet."

"It was too much to hope for."

"You should also inform Captain Spock that the new regulations in force mean that he has to be escorted under guard to the Security Building where he will remain until and during the court martial. This will take place as soon as possible after your arrival here."

"I'd forgotten about that," mused McCoy after the Commodore's face had disappeared from the screen.

"He will only be under electronic surveillance, Doctor."

"Spock is bound to know, but I'd better tell him just the same."

"I don't like any of this!" said Scotty with a sigh. "I tell you, I don't! And yet it's a relief not to have Spock on our backs any more, even if he was a better Captain than I can ever be, that I have to admit."

"How can you say that?"

"He was, Doctor. Efficiency was achieved all right, now I have a job to keep everyone from slacking too much. I expect he's enjoying himself at the moment working with his beloved computers and processing all that data about the black sun."

* * * *

McCoy went to find Spock, finding him working as usual, and was shocked by his drawn features and hollowed eyes.

"Are you ill?"

"Negative. When did you last give me a check-up, Doctor?"

"Ten hours before arrival at the Epsilon Apodis system."

"How could I have become ill in such a short time? I am tired, it is temporary."

"Are you working yourself to exhaustion not to think of the future?"

"If it pleases you to think so, by all means, Doctor."

"Commodore Maynard sent word that a court martial awaits you. Do you know what that means?"

"Guard escort and detention until and during court martial. Is that all?"

"You should choose a defending counsel. Captain Arnay from Starfleet is the best."

"From Starfleet," repeated Spock thoughtfully.

"As Captain you are entitled to have him, or... "

"I will follow your advice and have Captain Arnay, Doctor."

McCoy looked at him worriedly. Spock following his advice was not usual! And he was not looking well at all. "Leave those wretched computers alone and tell me when you last had some food."

"Food?" replied the Vulcan absently.

"Yes, food - what you eat."

"It is not important."

"It is, and if I don't see you in the dining area at regular intervals, it's sickbay for you."

"The threat is effective, Doctor, I will eat."

McCoy's threat produced the required effect and Spock appeared in the dining area, took a tray and settled by himself at a table, quite unconcerned by stares and meeting everyone's eyes calmly. There were no incidents or comments - indeed several officers wondered if they would have had his bravado had they been awaiting court martial.

* * * *

The next day McCoy sought him out again and the Vulcan showed a trace of impatience. "Are you haunting me, Doctor? I have eaten."

"It's not that. There will be a service for the two casualties in a couple of hours. Their families have asked us to give space burials. Don't forget to attend."

"I will not attend, Doctor."

"What? Even you can make the gesture, Spock, and... "

"It will make no difference to the dead men. I will not attend."

"And your duty to the living? The crew will never forgive you that."

"Irrelevant," he replied absently, looking at a screen picture of the black sun. "Did you know, Doctor, that the gravitational pull variations are... "

"I don't care! For that you won't attend! Hoping to get mitigation if your scientific work is of value, I presume! Spock, you belong with computers, you have no heart!"

"Thank you, Doctor. Now please let me get on with my work."

The crew regarded his non-attendance at the burial as proof of his inhumanity and gave him a wide berth whenever they met him in corridors or in the dining area, which did not seem to bother Spock at all.

* * * *

Further aggravation occurred when Spock refused to take up his old station on the bridge during an ion storm.

"I will not come to the bridge, Mr. Scott. You have other officers qualified to... "

"But none as good as you, sir."

"Illogical! Aren't you afraid I will make another mistake?"

"No, sir, not for straightforward readings and data... "

"Nevertheless I will not do it, and that is final."

"You're mad!" exclaimed McCoy. "Is this your revenge on us for your own mistakes? My final report will mention this, you know, and if anything untoward happens, it will be your fault."

"Enough, Doctor. My decision is final."

They left him then, both officers angry and bewildered. It was not like Spock to be vindictive, so why? But nothing could be read from the impassive features and expressionless eyes.

Fortunately the ion storm did not prove too violent and the Enterprise established orbit around Starbase 3 in due course without further incidents.

McCoy and Mr. Scott were in the transporter room awaiting the guards and were informed, "Three to beam up."

"Unusual," muttered Scotty as he operated the controls.

The shimmering figures appeared and McCoy ran to the central officer, beaming. "Jim! It's good to see you!"

"Captain," asked Scotty eagerly, "does this mean...?"

"Yes, Scotty, I've been given the Enterprise back."

"That's good news indeed, sir."

"How, Jim? I was told it was unlikely."

"Pure chance, Bones. I was told by Commodore Maynard that as he hadn't had any instructions for me, he asked Starfleet soon after sending your report and was told by Commodore Mendez that I'd been overlooked somehow and didn't figure on any list, so I might as well have the Enterprise back."

"Great! Thank God! How do you feel, Jim?"

"I'm fine, but I only learned yesterday all that has happened, and I'm still suffering from shock."

"So you know. That Vulcan 'friend' of yours tried to take your command."

"As I said, I was only told yesterday, when I came out of the convalescent home, and I couldn't believe it. I can't believe it now! I just don't understand, Bones, I don't..."

"You mean you don't want to believe it," said McCoy, as they arrived on the bridge where the officers beamed at Kirk and expressed their relief at having him back. Kirk sat in the command chair, feeling its sides with relish, when silence suddenly fell at the sight of Spock and his two-guard escort standing in front of the lift doors watching the scene with typical Vulcan impassivity.

Kirk got up and faced the slim tall figure in the impeccable yellow shirt and gold braid of command, and the officers stepped back as though to leave the two Captains more conscious of the unusual situation.

"Why, Spock? Why?" asked Kirk.

No answer came, and Kirk added, "If you had wanted command so badly, Spock, I would have recommended you for promotion."

"Thank you, Captain," murmured the Vulcan as Kirk, who had stepped nearer to his ex-First Officer, exclaimed,

"Spock, you're ill!"

"I am not ill, Captain," said Spock in a firm voice.

"Bones," exclaimed Kirk, "what's been going on?"

"He doesn't look too well, I admit," said McCoy, taking in the sharply defined lines of fatigue on the Vulcan's face and the deeply shadowed eyes as well as the pale complexion, "but what do you expect when he shuts himself up

with computers non-stop? I did manage to make him eat, not that it seems to have done much good," he added with a shrug.

And yet there was no hint of weakness in Spock's attitude as he stood between his two guards, giving his usual impression of controlled energy.

"Wearing that uniform is an insult to Jim, and the last straw!" added McCoy with sudden anger.

"I am a Captain, Doctor, and perfectly entitled to wear this uniform. I fail to see where animal fodder comes in, and will disregard it as one of your usual illogical remarks. Sir," he added, turning back to Kirk, "all the scientific equipment is ready to be beamed down to the Science Research Centre, together with the tapes including the duly processed data and all relevant information for correlation by the scientists on Starbase 3. A full check-up of every major science and computer system throughout the ship has been carried out and you will find it all in perfect order. And now if you will excuse me, I have an appointment with Captain Arnay."

"Just a minute, Spock," said Kirk. "Just answer this; did you really want my command?"

"Yes, sir," replied the Vulcan unflinchingly.

"And two men dead count for nothing?"

"It was regrettable, sir, as accidents always are."

"And that's all you have to say?"

"Yes, sir."

He stepped into the lift, followed by his escort, as Kirk went back to his chair and sat down, the picture of dejection.

"I won't believe it, Bones, I won't! And yet..."

"He nearly destroyed the ship, and killed two men," finished McCoy.

"Why?"

"In a bid for scientific glory, obsessed as he was by that black sun."

Mr Scott was standing by and tried to change the subject. "Are we leaving, Captain?"

"No, Scotty. We have to attend Spock's court martial tomorrow."

"Aye, of course. I don't like that kind of occasion."

"I couldn't read Spock at all. His humanity is buried somewhere, and only the Vulcan can be seen, and to read Vulcans is no easy matter. Bones, I'm going back to Starbase 3 to see Captain Arnay after his interview with Spock."

"You'll get nothing out of him! He's bound by professional secrecy."

"I know, but I want to offer my testimony in Spock's favour, stress his past record, and hope to get under his guard perhaps and find some clue or indication which might put us on the track of the truth."

"I'll come with you, but we have the truth already."

* * * *

They beamed down and arrived at the Security Building as Captain Arnay was coming out of Spock's room, and the officer answered their request for a few minutes of his time, "Will you wait here, please? I have a few matters to attend to, but I'll not be long."

Kirk and McCoy settled in to the room, a typical room for people awaiting trial, and they were relieved to see that it was not a cell, just a normal, if purely functional small apartment.

"Do you know Captain Arnay at all, Jim?" asked McCoy.

"A little, Bones, and Spock couldn't have chosen better. He has several Vulcan friends and understands their customs and attitudes. He is also reputed to be very upright, with a deep sense of justice, but I don't know him at all well, and we'll see for ourselves."

"He looked rather cold and forbidding, a little like Spock."

"Vulcan influence, maybe. Here he is."

The officer entered and apologised for keeping them waiting, then sat down and waited, his eyes curious and watchful under the mop of red hair and the wide forehead supposed to indicate intelligence.

"Captain," said Kirk, "I would like to know first what are Spock's chances."

"Of doing what, sir?"

"Of exonerating himself, of course."

"He has none, sir. Anything else?"

"But... you must do something! What help do you propose?"

"My affair."

"Look, I'm ready to testify in his favour."

"Are you? I don't advise you to."

"But I'm his friend..."

"Are you?" asked the Captain, a strange look in his fixed gaze which Kirk could not read.

"Look, what is this?" asked McCoy. "I know Spock's guilty, but he is entitled to proper defense."

"How will he plead?" asked Kirk.

"Not guilty."

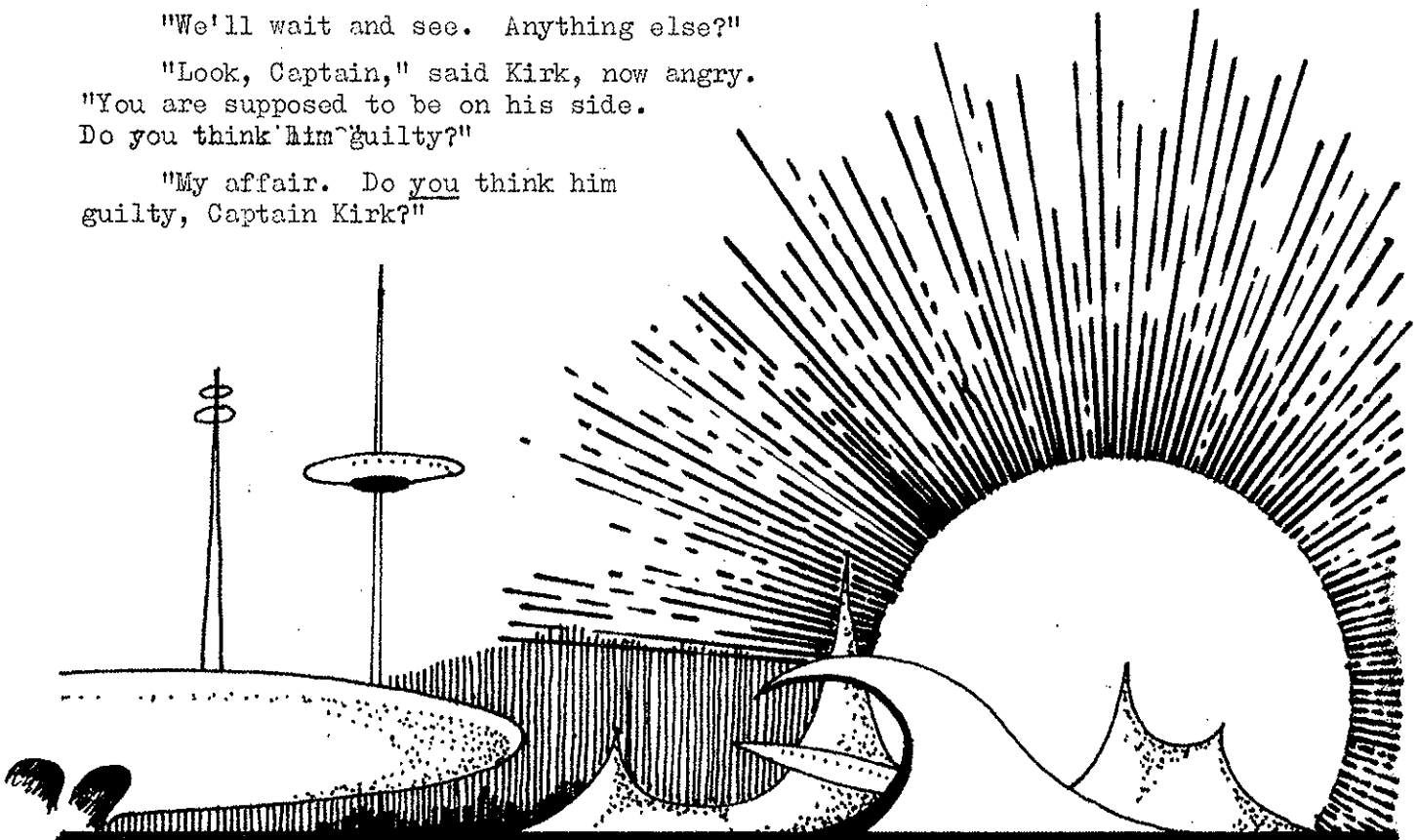
"Can he get away with it? With all that proof and..."

"We'll wait and see. Anything else?"

"Look, Captain," said Kirk, now angry.

"You are supposed to be on his side. Do you think him guilty?"

"My affair. Do you think him guilty, Captain Kirk?"



"No, even though it is not logical."

"My advice to you, however, Captain Kirk, is to leave Captain Spock alone and not testify at the court martial unless asked to."

"That's monstrous! Captain Arnay, he was my friend... "

"'Was' is right, sir."

"I wish I could understand what you're saying," said Kirk, exasperated.

"Are you a Vulcan by any chance?" asked McCoy.

"No, Doctor, and many are the times when I wish... But I will not betray any trust invested in me any more than a Vulcan would."

"Then you know the truth!"

"And so do you, Captain Kirk. Good day." Captain Arnay left the room briskly and the two Enterprise officers followed more slowly, McCoy angry at the strange behaviour of the Captain, and Kirk trying to understand what the officer had tried to say... if indeed he had been trying to tell them something.

They tried to see Spock, but were told he refused to see anyone. Kirk went to Commodore Maynard and obtained authorisation, but might as well have spared himself the trouble. Spock remained completely out of his reach and impervious to all his efforts.

Kirk and McCoy beamed back aboard the Enterprise and heard, unbelievably, that Captain Arnay had been recalled to Starfleet HQ because his wife was gravely ill, so Spock's defence would rest with a Captain Van Gald from Starbase 3.

"What's going on, Bones?" raged Kirk, bewildered and angry. "I'd have sworn Captain Arnay wasn't the type to desert a client, and yet when I called Captain Van Gald, I was told that no defence dossier or notes had been left, everything was back to the beginning, with Spock refusing to co-operate on top of it all!"

"What do you mean, refusing to co-operate?"

"He won't tell Captain Van Gald anything, just tells him to look up your report and the computer tapes!"

"Perhaps that's all he told Arnay too."

"Possible, but... Bones, I feel as if I'm going mad! I... everything's illogical, and yet it's also logical in many ways... "

"That's only because you won't accept the truth of Spock's guilt, Jim. Once you accept it... "

"Everything fits. I know."

In desperation, Kirk searched his quarters, in case Spock had left some clue behind, but in vain. Any trace of the Vulcan's occupation had completely been erased, in fact he might never have lived there at all. His effects were packed neatly in his old quarters ready to be taken off ship.

* * * *

The next day the Enterprise officers beamed down for the court martial, all wearing dress uniform, and Kirk had been accepted by Captain Van Gald as witness for the defence.

The Vulcan's entry in the magnificent dress uniform of Captain created a stir, and there was a shocked reaction from the judges when Spock announced his plea of not guilty. Captain Van Gald whispered to Kirk,

"I told him and told him, but he would not listen. In my opinion, he is guilty, but insane."

While the preliminaries were going on, Kirk observed the Vulcan and saw how very tired he looked, near exhaustion, in fact, but his attitude was remote, as though none of the proceedings were his concern.

The first part of the court martial was occupied by the evidence of Dr. McCoy's report, the computer tapes from the Enterprise confirming it, and the doctor's final report, and the defence counsel questioned none of it. So at the interval, Kirk asked Van Gald anxiously, "What's going to happen? Couldn't you try to..."

"Do what, Captain? The evidence is irrefutable," said the officer with disgust. "That Vulcan is, as I told you, guilty but insane. He isn't interested, won't say anything in his defence, yet pleads not guilty!"

The proceedings started again with the testimonies from the Enterprise officers who served under Spock. After their violent resentment of the new Captain, they gave surprisingly mild testimonies concerning the Vulcan, and Kirk knew why. They were all intimidated by the calm and quiet dignity of the accused and his lack of interest in the proceedings. Kirk was called and gave a good testimony, testimony which the prosecution attacked successfully by showing how Spock had made the most of his Captain's illness to take away his command. Kirk was the one who benefitted and who was thought generous to forgive the Vulcan and try to defend him.

"Arday was right," muttered Kirk as he sat down. "I shouldn't have... What else was he right about? I have to think..."

But it was difficult among the solemnity of the occasion and his head was already aching from too much thinking without success so far.

When the defence was called, all the defending counsel invoked was Spock's record, and when Spock himself was called to testify, he did not even bother to get up and just said, "I have nothing to say."

Commodore Maynard looked angry as he addressed the accused. "You will get up when spoken to, Captain."

Spock obeyed and the Commodore continued, "Do you realise the gravity of the charges?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you are not guilty, why don't you defend yourself?"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"That is illogical and you know it."

"I have nothing to say, sir," repeated Spock, like a machine.

"Don't you realise that your silence is an admission of guilt?" No answer came and the Commodore started to lose patience. "Answer me, Captain."

"What was the question, sir?"

"Are you being impertinent?"

"No, sir."

"Look, I don't want any come back on this court martial under the pretext that you were not given every opportunity to defend yourself. I am trying to help you, in view of your past record - so why don't you collaborate?"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

Commodore Maynard stared at Spock uneasily, knowing he had to give up and that nothing would get behind the drawn but unreadable mask. That wretched Vulcan would give nothing away; how could he reach a just decision? Even when Captain Kirk, with the court's permission, asked Spock to defend himself, the ex-First Officer paid no attention, seeming not even to hear. After that, the verdict was more or less a foregone conclusion. Spock, in view of his past record, would resign.

"I would have given a dishonourable discharge," said Commodore Maynard severely, "but the deaths of the two men could have been an accident -- there is a slight element of doubt. Your past record is impressive and this is your first mistake; you are getting off lightly. You will now be escorted back to the Security Building where you will await the final formalities, then you will be free to go."

"He got off lightly, all right," murmured Van Gald to Kirk as they watched the tribunal leave, "and should think himself lucky."

"Lucky? To lose his career?" exclaimed Kirk. "Bones, come with me. I must see Spock, see if I can help..."

They arrived at the Security Building and saw Spock enter his room. He did not seem overjoyed to see them and stared frozenly as Kirk said, "I know it sounds trite, Spock, but I am sorry. Why didn't you defend yourself?"

No answer came and McCoy shrugged. "He couldn't, Jim."

Kirk looked into the unflinching gaze of his ex-First Officer and nearly screamed with frustration. He just could not get through! He clutched his head in desperation, and tried another track.

"Is there anything I can do, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain, there is one thing you could do for me."

"What?" asked Kirk eagerly.

"Leave." The icy reply made Kirk step back as though struck, but even the hurt in his eyes left the Vulcan apparently unmoved. The Captain turned and walked away as McCoy shouted at Spock in a fury,

"Don't you see how you've hurt him? Don't you know he can't sleep because of you, and I have to help him? He shouldn't have such a strain so soon after his recovery, but you don't care, do you?"

Spock stared back at him steadily, without the slightest trace of emotion, and the exasperated doctor added, "You put Jim through hell! Perhaps one day you'll know what hell is -- and when you do, I hope I'm there to see it!"

He ran after Kirk, and they returned to the Enterprise in silence, apart from McCoy muttering almost inaudibly about that inhuman monster, but the Captain didn't seem to hear him.

* * * *

On the bridge, a strangely quiet atmosphere prevailed, with everyone moving noiselessly, without talking unless necessary, and Kirk knew that, like himself, they were still thinking of Spock and the court martial. McCoy saw Uhura staring at Spock's station and asked,

"You do think him guilty, don't you?"

"I... I don't know..." she answered miserably.

Kirk went and stood at Spock's station and felt McCoy's hand on his shoulder. "Come away, Jim, this won't help..."

"Leave me alone," snapped the Captain, in such a tone that the Doctor stepped back worriedly and watched his friend.

Kirk sat in Spock's chair and rested his hands on the controls, and McCoy said softly, "Jim, you're torturing yourself..."

"Be quiet! I haven't had time to think properly yet, what with the shock and your doping me and the court martial, but I want to think now."

"You had to sleep..."

"Be quiet or leave the bridge," said Kirk, in a tone which hurt the

Doctor, who resigned himself to letting the Captain have his own way.

Kirk settled back into the chair and let his whole body relax completely, his mind seeing nothing but the past as he recalled all the adventures and dangers shared with Spock. Never once had his First Officer failed him, even when it meant the mind meld which could make the Vulcan so vulnerable. He recalled their last meld and his eyes became misty while he suddenly understood Captain Arnay's words. Fine friend I was! thought Kirk, angry with himself. What did I do? Made it worse by testifying against Arnay's advice! Now it's up to me to find out why, and I can be as stubborn as Spock.

He wiped his eyes and got up, then faced the others and said quietly, "Spock had a reason for what he did. I mean to discover it."

"How can you know, Jim?"

"I know, and that is enough as far as I'm concerned."

"That's not logical..."

"From you, Doctor," said Kirk coldly, "that is ludicrous!"

"You're behaving like a child, refusing to accept reality..."

"After all, Captain," said Scotty, "his guilt is perfectly logical."

"That's it - perfectly logical! Don't you see Spock's hand behind it?"

"Why should he court martial himself?" asked McCoy. "Why sabotage his career? There are easier ways of leaving Starfleet, to say nothing of two men dead."

"I don't know! I don't know!" exclaimed Kirk in sheer frustration.

"You're clutching at straws, Captain," said Scotty.

"No, Mr. Scott, not straws - faith and confidence in someone I trust even more than I trust myself."

"But you haven't any single fact or proof, Jim, just your blind faith. It's madness to..."

"Doctor, and you, Mr. Scott - let me say this now. I am going to prove Spock's innocence. I will do it either on my own, or with your help. It's up to you which it is."

He moved to his command chair and sat down, awaiting answers. The Chief Engineer was the first to speak.

"I'm with you, Captain. I've hated all this ghastly affair and could never convince myself completely of Mr. Spock's guilt."

"I agree," said Uhura. "My mind says he's guilty, but my heart - never."

"Well said, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "Exactly what I feel."

"I will collaborate, Captain," said Sulu. "If there is a hidden truth, I would rather know."

"So would I," said Chekov, "even if he is a Cossack!"

They laughed and Kirk looked at McCoy. "Well, Bones, are you with us?"

"You realise, I hope, that your conviction is based entirely on emotion."

"Do you have to talk like Spock because he's not here?"

"I am not," said McCoy furiously. "Jim, I see no chance of succeeding."

He gripped the rail by Spock's station, refusing to look at anyone as Kirk went and stood by him. "Bones, what is it? Are you so afraid of being proved wrong?"

"Yes, perhaps that's it," whispered McCoy. "If he is innocent, what does that make me? It gives me nightmares."

"So even you aren't sure."

"I thought I was, until Arney and you came along! No, that's not true, whenever I saw Spock I doubted. I'm with you, Jim, whatever I can do."

"Right," said Kirk briskly, "we'll start at the beginning and try to find flaws - or straws - to clutch at."

"There won't be any, sir," said Uhura. "Not with Mr. Spock."

The Captain refused to be discouraged, and asked for a report of what had happened after he was taken off the ship to the hospital, and Uhura reported that Spock was called to see Captain Laung at Starbase 3.

"Why?" asked Kirk.

"About the Enterprise's next orders, sir."

"So Spock was called, he didn't go down of his own accord."

"Does it matter, sir?" asked Scotty.

"I don't know, but it might. I want to see Captain Laung - call him, please, Lieutenant!"

After a while, she reported, "He's on leave, sir - won't be back for five weeks."

"How convenient!" mused Kirk.

"Jim, really, Spock had nothing to do with the man's leave and you know it!"

The Captain's hands tightened in renewed frustration and he went through the recent happenings again, pouncing on Spock's strangely long absence from the bridge during the orbit of the black sun.

"Where was he? Why did he stay in auxiliary control for so long?"

"He had his duplicate scientific equipment there and became so absorbed he forgot about everything else," said McCoy.

"Possibly," sighed Kirk, "and yet Spock would not forget his responsibility to the ship."

"He had all the necessary controls there to command from, sir," said Scotty. "And a screen to follow what was happening. Whether he did or not, we don't know."

"We don't know anything. What about all that work on the way back to Starbase 3? What was he doing?"

"Preparing the scientific report for the Science Centre and checking his beloved computers," said Scotty.

"You actually saw him doing all that?"

"No, sir. He could have been just amusing himself for all we know."

"Don't any of you know exactly what he was doing?"

"Why should we, Jim? Scientific work and computers are - were - his job, his life work. With his career in ruins, what better occupational therapy?"

Kirk nodded, discouraged. Uhura was right, Spock's logic was unbeatable, and yet he must find a flaw. He must!

His thoughts were disturbed by Uhura. "Captain, I've just been informed that the previous information about Captain Laung was wrong. He had the rest of his leave cancelled because his second-in-command is very ill in hospital, and he's just back."

Kirk's heart missed a beat. Was that the flaw? Even Spock couldn't have anticipated this!

"He won't be in the best of moods after having his leave cancelled!" said McCoy as they went to the Captain's office after beaming down.

That proved to be true. The officer received them, surrounded by tapes and papers and obviously in an irate temper about his cancelled leave.

"You will be brief, I hope. You don't mind if I go on sorting out some of these papers?"

"Not at all, Captain," said Kirk. "What I would like to know is this - did Commander Spock sign an application for command of the Enterprise?"

"Yes, of course he did! You must know that!"

"Under pressure?"

"Certainly not. What pressure? Do you really imagine anyone is able to pressure a Vulcan?"

Kirk looked at the slight, short man and realised how incongruous his thought had been. McCoy got up.

"Give it up, Jim, there's nothing to find."

Kirk ignored him and asked, "Did you call Spock down about the Enterprise's new mission?"

"What? I thought you'd gone," said the officer, sparing a glance from the papers that were absorbing his attention. "Of course I did."

Kirk gave up. McCoy looked away from the despair on his face and took his leave from the Captain. As they were going out, however, the officer seemed struck by a sudden thought.

"Just one moment, Captain. You did say you are Captain Kirk?"

"Yes."

"And you are now fit, discharged from hospital?"

"Yes, perfectly fit," said Kirk, puzzled.

"Then what are you doing here? Why aren't you on your way to Starbase 10?"

"Why on earth should I go to Starbase 10?"

"Haven't you been told? Honestly, I can't rely on anyone among this moronic staff of mine to do any work, I have to do it all myself..."

"Captain, please," interrupted Kirk agitatedly. "Why should I be going to Starbase 10?"

"Starfleet nominated you as Commanding Officer there, of course, after your First Officer was promoted to be Captain of the Enterprise, subject to the command test. I expect he is Captain by now, isn't he?"

"No, he isn't!" said Kirk bitterly.

"Whyever not? He was keen - he'd already put in an application for it - his appointment came through before I went on leave - "

"What? But he put in an application for Captaincy through Commodore Maynard... and that must have been after..."

"But why?" asked McCoy. "Why didn't he just argue with Commodore Maynard to get temporary command while you recovered?"

You know Maynard's reputation, Bones, he'd never have changed one line of Starfleet's orders. Even if Spock had resigned, it would have changed nothing. Someone else would have been given the Enterprise. Spock knew that and took the necessary steps to keep my command for me. How he did it, though..."

Captain Laung had been listening in bafflement, and now Kirk asked, "Where are the tapes of the orders, Captain?"

"I'll get them."

But a thorough search produced nothing. "They've vanished. I can't understand it!"

"I can," said Kirk wearily. "Captain, a grave injustice has been done to my First Officer, and I need your help."

Acquainted with all the facts, Captain Laung followed them to Commodore Maynard's office. Maynard looked at them as though in fear.

"Don't tell me! It's that Vulcan?"

He heard them out, but still looked unconvinced. "If what you say is true, it still does not explain or excuse the deaths of two men and the near destruction of the ship and crew."

"Spock engineered it all, and made it look like an error on his part. The two men died by accident."

"How do you know?"

"Spock said so."

"That's not enough, Captain. Any proof? Computer tapes?"

"Not at the moment, sir."

"Let's check first on those supposed orders. Starfleet HQ will have a copy, and it will be slight evidence, anyway."

But Starfleet HQ's reply was that no such orders existed. Captain Kirk had not been posted to Starbase 10, and Commander Spock had been promoted in answer to his application.

"How did Spock manage that?" Kirk gasped, bemused, as the Commodore stared the Captain Laung.

"Were you anticipating your leave, and dead drunk when you imagined all this?"

"I was not, sir; I told the truth."

"I can't accept it without the obvious proof."

"Sir," asked Kirk, "may I contact Captain Arney? He could help."

The Commodore put the call through, but Captain Arney was on compassionate leave because of his wife's illness and could not be reached.

"He must have destroyed the tapes on Spock's instructions, and that's why he couldn't take part in the court martial. He knew the truth."

"Captain Kirk, are you seriously accusing a man of Captain Arney's standing? I won't have it."

"Sir," begged Kirk. "May I go through all the evidence again? I might find a flaw, now that I know what I'm looking for."

"By all means, but you won't find any; I've tried."

"You, sir?"

"Yes, Captain Kirk. Why do you think Commander Spock received such a light sentence? What I said at the trial was for form, I never thought he was guilty; but he wanted to be declared guilty, so what could I do? My feeling is purely a gut feeling, nothing else. I've presided many courts martial and I know a guilty man when I see one. That Vulcan was not, but that won't make me any easier to satisfy that he is innocent; I have to have absolute proof, not drunken imagining. The trial is over and the judgement stands as far as I am concerned."

Kirk retired into another room with McCoy to search for clues through the evidence presented at the court martial, but found nothing, as Commodore Maynard had predicted. They returned to his office to give the dossier back, and the Commanding Officer said, "I suggest that you look aboard the Enterprise, Captain, but you are to leave in three days - Starfleet orders have just come."

"I have no Science Officer, sir."

"I know, one will be appointed shortly."

* * * *

Back aboard the Enterprise, Kirk assembled his senior officers and reported his findings, then added, "Our only chance is to find something aboard, some indication as to what really happened. I don't care if we have to take the whole ship apart, we must find it."

"If it's there to be found, we'll find it, sir," said Scotty resolutely. He gave orders to his men as Kirk went on,

"Security, beam down and find Spock. Don't dare come back without him."

"We'll find him, sir."

"And he'll tell me what he did. I'll make him tell me, somehow! But we'd better go on looking, just the same."

Kirk went to the cabin he had found as he had left it, without the slightest trace of Spock's occupation, and searched again every nook and cranny just in case, but found nothing. Restless, he went back to the bridge but stopped at sickbay where he was shocked by the Doctor's haggard face.

"Bones, it wasn't your fault..."

"Illogical, Captain'," said McCoy with a sarcastic laugh at himself. "I put Spock wherever he is now."

"Which is exactly what he wanted you to do."

"I know. And do you think it helps? For a non-Human, that Vulcan knows a lot about Human emotions, if you ask me, and when I think of the things I said to him..."

"Come to the bridge. They may have found Spock by now."

But it was a weary Chief of Security who reported, "We can't find him, sir."

"You mean you haven't looked properly."

"Captain, we've gone through every hotel on the base, and in town; he hasn't been seen."

"Then look again. Go through every room if necessary, then look elsewhere, but find him."

"No vessel has left the Starbase since the court martial, Captain," said Uhura. "I've checked. He can't have left."

"And his effects are still on board, anyway," added McCoy.

They pondered on Spock's possible whereabouts when Uhura announced, "Captain, a message from Commodore Maynard. A new Science Officer is coming aboard."

"I'm afraid your new Science Officer is only young and newly-qualified," said the Commodore. "Lt. Rand. There's no-one else available at the moment."

"What? Yes, yes, thank you sir," replied Kirk, his mind elsewhere. He looked round the bridge and said indifferently, "Someone should meet him, I suppose."

As Kirk remained seated, Chekov got up and went to the transporter room where the newly-appointed Science Officer was rather taken aback to be welcomed (if welcomed was the word) by a mere ensign.

"Are you staying long, sir? I expect you want to go to the bridge."

He followed Chekov. When they met the Chief Engineer, he stared at the newcomer. "Who are you?"

"Lt. Rand, new Science Officer."

"Nonsense, we don't need you, we'll have our Mr. Spock here soon if I know anything about the Captain, so why don't you go back to where you came from, like a good lad?"

Rand started wondering if collective madness had invaded the ship as they arrived on the bridge where Sulu gave the newcomer a wide berth, looking at him in disgust. Chekov approached Kirk. "The new Science Officer, sir."

"Who? Oh, yes. Never mind now, just go away."

"You mean to my quarters, sir?" asked the startled lieutenant.

"Quarters? What quarters? You're not staying."

"But sir..."

"Don't you dare set foot in Spock's cabin!" said McCoy with such ferocity that the officer stepped back in fear.

The Captain was now staring at him fixedly and confirming Rand's suspicions; they were all mad. "You do know about computers, don't you?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, sir."

"Not enough, I bet!" said McCoy disdainfully.

"You see that computer over there?" said Kirk, pointing to Spock's station. "Take it apart and find it."

"Find what, sir?"

"Proof of Spock's innocence, of course!" exclaimed McCoy. "Get to work - we haven't much time!"

Uhura took pity on the poor man and put him in the picture, and Rand went to work hastily.

* * * *

Several hours later, an exhausted group of senior officers assembled in the briefing room.

"Anything?" asked Kirk with vanishing hope at the sight of tired and dispirited faces.

"No, sir," said Scotty. "We found nothing."

"Nothing, sir," said Rand.

"Of course not," said McCoy. "Spock wouldn't have left anything in his own computer."

"Scotty, what did Spock do while in auxiliary control?"

"I don't know, sir, study the black sun, presumably. There's nothing amiss in auxiliary control, in fact everything's in perfect order."

"Naturally, after Spock everything would be," said McCoy dejectedly.

"Even the smallest oddity could be a clue. Anything missing, or misplaced or renewed? Anywhere?"

"There are a few insignificant facts - like for instance, we used a rather large amount of coolant in the power plant, but I can give you at least six possible explanations for that, so it means nothing."

The Chief of Security reported again, looking exhausted. "Sir, I'm sorry, but we can't find him. We've looked everywhere twice; to go on would be useless."

"Very well. Beam back aboard," said Kirk wearily. "Where can he be?"

Since no-one knew, only silence answered him. This was shattered by a call from Commodore Maynard. "You are getting ready to leave, I hope, Captain. Has your Science Officer reported for duty?"

"Yes sir... Could you have Commander Spock found, sir?"

"Whatever for? He's free to go where he likes. Give up and be ready to leave on time."

"Sir, I can't... "

"Captain, you're not going to disobey Starfleet orders, are you?"

Kirk looked at the screen with hatred and was going to flare up when McCoy whispered, "Don't, Jim, don't throw away what Spock gave so much for."

The Captain mastered his anger and threw a grateful glance at the Doctor, then addressed the Commodore. "Sir, you must want justice done, or an injustice put right - you felt yourself that Spock was innocent. Please give me more time so that I can prove it."

"Very well, Captain, you have two more days, but not one second more."

He cut the communication as Kirk sighed, "Two days... What can we do? Any suggestions?"

"Why can't we find him?" asked McCoy. "Spock hasn't left the Starbase and his effects are still aboard... "

"His effects!" shouted Kirk. "That's it, we must look for his personal log."

But he hesitated when entering Spock's cabin. "Do you think it would have occurred to him that we might look at his personal log, Bones? I hate the thought of such prying."

"What else can we do?"

Kirk nodded. He had no trouble finding the tape, packed neatly by Spock with his other effects. The fact that it had been so easy to find was not encouraging, but Kirk clutched it hard on his way to the bridge. Either Spock had thought that he might be driven to his personal log, in which case it was useless, or he had not, in which case there was hope.

Hope was soon dashed. The beginning of the tape, about one-third of it, was in code; the rest was the pure mathematics Spock liked to spend his off-duty time on.

"We should have known," said Scotty. "That Vulcan will drive us mad with frustration!"

"Lt. Rand," asked Kirk, "can you break this code?"

"I should think not, sir."

"How can you know just like that?" asked McCoy. "You wouldn't be trying to save your job, would you?"

The poor Science Officer saw red. "If you think I want to stay aboard a ship where I'm looked at as if I'd just crawled out of the woodwork - "

"We should apologise," said Kirk gently. "None of this is your fault."

"I'm sorry for my outburst, Captain. I'd like to help, but Commander Spock probably used Vulcan symbols or language, and I have no knowledge of either. If he did not, I can try decoding, but it's not something I've done often... "

"It could be a very simple code," said Kirk, "because with Spock we would assume the complicated, and he would realise that. We just have to crack this, though, it's our only hope. What are the Science Labs on Starbase 3 like, Lieutenant Rand?"

"Good, sir. In fact, there are several brilliant scientists on a visit now to work on the black sun data."

"Right. We work on it, but we get them to work on it too; and we have to hurry!"

"But Jim, you've no authority to... "

A call to Commodore Maynard received a very angry refusal for the mobilisation of the Science Centre, and Kirk beamed down in a fury. He went straight to the Centre, and marched resolutely into the Director's office.

"Dr. Roland, I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise... "

To his amazement, a wide smile of welcome beamed at him. "I'm pleased to meet you, Captain. We're still recovering from the wonder of your vessel's extraordinary black sun pictures and excellent data, and as we go through them, we're discovering new things all the time. As for the final processing, a work of genius..."

"I had nothing to do with this, sir, my First Officer did, Commander Spock."

"Is he here also? I'd be pleased to meet him - What's the matter?"

"Don't you know that Spock was court-martialled and dismissed from Starfleet?"

"What? No, I didn't know, Captain. We've been shut in here too absorbed in the wonder of it all. We expected little from that mission, and got so much! Commander Spock did far more than... But I'm digressing, please tell me, what happened?"

Kirk gave him the essential facts briefly, then concluded, "That's it, sir. Our only hope is that code in his personal log, and we'd appreciate your help."

"For the man who obtained those photos and data, anything, Captain. Commander Spock's code should be a hard but fascinating problem to work on."

"We are short of time, sir."

"We'll start on it now, and once on a problem, we don't let go."

"Any knowledge of Vulcan?"

"Two of my team have, Captain, they will concentrate on that angle."

Kirk handed him a duplicate of Spock's log and went back to the Enterprise with more hope. His vessel started to look like a ghost ship, with crew members going about with pencil and paper or working feverishly at computers. The non-scientific staff was having a go too in the event that it was a simple code, so simple no-one was guessing at it.

* * * *

And time was going relentlessly by, with another search for Spock proving a waste of time. An irate call from Commodore Maynard didn't help.

"Captain Kirk, are you responsible for the shutdown of my Science Centre?"

"Shutdown, sir?" asked Kirk, playing for time.

Yes, shutdown! They accept no calls, admit no callers. They've shut themselves in and all I got is that they're working for a Vulcan and I could go to hell! Is he that same Vulcan, Captain? Are you responsible?"

"In a way, yes, sir, but they volunteered..."

"You've not heard the last of this, Captain."

Kirk shrugged and went back to the code tiredly, his head aching. The other officers looked haggard from lack of sleep and Kirk wondered fleetingly how they were going to cope with the next mission! But he had other worries at the moment and threw the code down in despair, he was no use at it. A shout from Lt. Rand startled the bridge.

"Got it!"

Everyone rushed to his station and nearly stifled him until Kirk restored some order. The new officer said hurriedly, "I have to check, but I think I found the key."

"So you are a clever lad after all," beamed Scotty.

"Work on it quickly, and congratulations!" said Kirk.

"Sir, it was an accident, a mistake I made which gave me the key..."

"Never mind, some of the greatest discoveries were made that way."

Every scientist aboard collaborated to decipher the code as the Science Centre was told the good news, thanked for their help and told they could go back to the black sun.

But when the tape started to be translated on to a screen, the title shocked the onlookers. 'Methods of sabotage'. A long list followed, with methodical arguments for and against, and comments on possible use aboard a Starship. The audience stared in dismay as McCoy exclaimed,

"That tape is useless and would put Spock back in a cell!"

"Aye," said Scotty. "Attempts at sabotaging a Starship aren't regarded with favour!"

Kirk felt like screaming, and everyone looked away from his ravaged features.

"That Vulcan will drive us all mad!" said McCoy tiredly. Looking at the haggard and exhausted people around him, he added, "Not that it matters, we'll soon be hospital cases at this rate!"

"So he did think we might look for his log," Kirk whispered with such despair that Uhura felt like crying.

"He would have, sir, being Spock."

To make things worse, Commodore Maynard called. "Captain Kirk, I am getting tired of that Vulcan of yours!"

"You mean you found him?" asked Kirk eagerly.

"Of course not, I've not been looking. But that invisible alien is disrupting this base and I will not have it any longer. Just as well you're leaving soon - and only your reputation and past record, Captain Kirk, saved you from severe sanctions for the mobilisation of the Science Centre. Don't push your luck. By the way, did you find anything?"

"No, sir."

"And for nothing you... ! Forget that Vulcan and be ready for your mission. That is an order!"

Kirk turned the screen off and got up. "Orders or no orders, I'm not leaving here without Spock."

"That mission could be vitally important, Jim," said McCoy.

"It's not, just a journey to Deneb 3 for an official ceremony of some sort. Any Starship will do - in fact, two are already going, why three?"

"It's not for you to decide, Jim. If you don't leave here on time, you'll

be court-martialled."

"Spock went through that for my sake and you expect me not to be ready to do the same?" asked Kirk angrily.

"But you might lose your command, Captain," said Scotty.

Kirk looked at Spock's station and answered softly, "I don't think I want it on those terms, the price is too high."

"That's all very well," said McCoy in a brusque manner, hiding his emotion, "but what good will it do if both you and Spock are chucked out? What would you do then?"

"We'd have plenty of leisure time to decide. Probably keep a farm on a colony somewhere, Spock can be the brains of the outfit and I'll be the brawn."

"And you would expect me to be the vet to any animals you might raise, I suppose!" said McCoy.

Laughter released some of the tension on the bridge; it had been quite a while since anyone had laughed! Scotty was not so amused, however, and muttered to Sulu, "It looks as though if we lose Spock, we lose the Captain as well. It's a nightmare!"

Kirk was pacing up and down and said resolutely, "I'm going down to Star-base 3 myself to find Spock. He must be somewhere."

"Captain," said Sulu. "We should be getting ready for leaving..."

"No, we shouldn't. I don't want to hear another word about that senseless subject."

"But sir," said Scotty, "it's our duty to..."

"I take full responsibility, and will be the one to answer in a court martial, where I promise not to involve any of you."

He was interrupted by a call from Commodore Maynard again, and the officer's face radiated fury. "This time, Captain Kirk, you have gone too far!"

"Sir?" asked Kirk, bewildered.

"I had been informed that the Science Centre was back to normal work, and in view of their relatively short time on your work, I decided to forget about it, but I have just been told that they are back on that Vulcan's tape again and nothing I can say will budge them. What are you playing at?"

"I had nothing to do with this, sir, and I don't understand, unless they did find something! I must ask!" He unceremoniously cut the Commodore off and called the Director of the Centre with mounting excitement.

"Was the code wrong? What's happening?"

"That Vulcan tape is full of surprises, Captain," said Dr. Roland. "Like you, we all thought that after the coded part, the rest was just pure mathematics done for recreation. One of my team, just for the same purpose, relaxation, decided to work through the rest of the tape, and discovered that after a few mathematical problems, another code, a mathematical one this time, was being used. We are working on this."

"Another code... Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Trust Spock to make things easy for us!" said McCoy sarcastically.

"How soon before...?" asked Kirk.

"We're working on it non-stop, Captain, and have found one of the keys, but the other eludes us for the moment."

"Two keys? Isn't that unusual?"

"Yes, Captain. Most unusual - and difficult."

"Naturally," sighed McCoy.

"If it's difficult, you must be on the right track," said Kirk, elation making his voice tremble. "Please keep us informed."

The atmosphere aboard the Enterprise had changed, there was hope now, and everyone waited anxiously, wondering if this could be another false hope.

* * * *

About five hours later, Dr. Roland beamed up with the tape, his face pale with fatigue. "We've done it, Captain, although we despaired at one time. I like difficult problems, but this? A nightmare! The second key was a Vulcan one so ingeniously adapted as to be practically undetectable. If one of my scientists hadn't studied on Vulcan for two years, we'd never have found it."

"I'm very grateful," said Kirk. "Thank you."

"That Commander Spock of yours is a remarkable man! I hate to tell you this, though - Captain, our work has been in vain."

"Oh no! You mean there's nothing... "

"Nothing of value for your Commander's rehabilitation, Captain. The coded mathematics hid notes on a scientific paper your First Officer was working on, that is all. I suspect that he realised you would look for his personal log and deliberately added that first outrageous part so as to discourage you from going on with your search."

"That's what I think too... but does that mean you believe there might still be something to find?"

"I don't know, Captain. There's nothing more in that log."

"What can I do next?" asked Kirk of no-one in particular, his tone so full of despair that everyone looked away from the naked anguish of his features. "Where can I look?"

"We've looked everywhere, Jim," said McCoy.

"Except his cabin. We found the log easily, and never searched it."

"Spock would never leave anything in so obvious a place... "

"Any better suggestions? Sir," he added to Dr. Roland, "would you come too? Should we find another log, we might need your assistance."

"I would do anything to help, Captain. I am with you."

* * * *

Kirk, McCoy and Dr. Roland entered Spock's quarters and the Captain again hesitated, understanding suddenly what it must have cost the Vulcan to occupy the Captain's cabin in order to antagonise the crew. "I hate going through his things when I know what a private person my First Officer is, but unfortunately we have no choice."

They started the methodical search, McCoy and Dr. Roland going through the furniture while Kirk looked through Spock's personal effects. Perhaps he would not mind so much if his Captain was doing it, thought Kirk morosely as he examined everything with the aim of finding a clue. He fingered Spock's IDIC medal, his mind showing him a vivid flashback of his First Officer, so elegant in his dress uniform with the medal round his neck, and he put it down carefully with emotion; would he ever see Spock wear it again? He went on grimly with the search and soon all the personal belongings were spread out on the desk and the bed. There was no other log or tape of any kind.

"Nothing anywhere, Jim," reported McCoy.

"This is beautiful!" said Dr. Roland, gazing at a large shimmering crystal Kirk picked up carefully.

"Yes, isn't it? Spock brought it back from Vulcan after his last leave, a gift from his family. I believe these crystals are rare." He was staring at it and added, "It doesn't feel cold to the touch, and gives a strange feeling, hypnotic perhaps, but then it is beautiful."

"I wish I could remember..." muttered Dr. Roland. "I've seen a similar crystal before, but where...?"

"Does it matter?" asked McCoy. "We want proof of Spock's innocence, not..."

"Captain," interrupted the scientist, "may I ask my colleague, Dr. Tai Wan, to have a look at it? He is familiar with Vulcan."

"By all means, but what use is a crystal? How can

"I don't know, Captain, I have a feeling it's
can't remember..."

Dr. Tai Wan, a small slight man with intelligent pleasant smile, looked at the crystal with undisguised

"Yes, an outstanding stone, one of the most I have ever seen - but then you did say that Commander comes from a very distinguished family."

"Look," said Kirk with impatience, "is it any prove his innocence?"

"No, Captain, no use at all."

"Then we're wasting time and..."

"Just a minute," said Dr. Roland. "I have just remembered where I saw a similar stone. It was at the Vulcan Embassy here, and the Vulcan attache told me it was a very special crystal."

"Yes, sir," said Dr. Tai Wan. "It is a Vulcan memory crystal. It can absorb thoughts directed at it and is used by Vulcans as a very personal and private recorder."

"But then this is it!" exclaimed Kirk excitedly. "Just what we want. All we have to do is get at those thoughts."

"You can't, Captain, only a telepath can."

"Then I'll go to the Vulcan Embassy and ask..."

"No, Captain," interrupted Dr. Tai Wan in horror, "don't! It would be useless and an insult to the personnel there. No Vulcan would read another Vulcan's memory crystal, it is a crime, a direct violation of their ethics. Nothing you could say or do would have the slightest effect."

Kirk now looked at the crystal with near hatred. There was the solution under their very eyes and it was out of reach!

"I have to try. The Vulcan Representative might make an exception to save Spock's career."

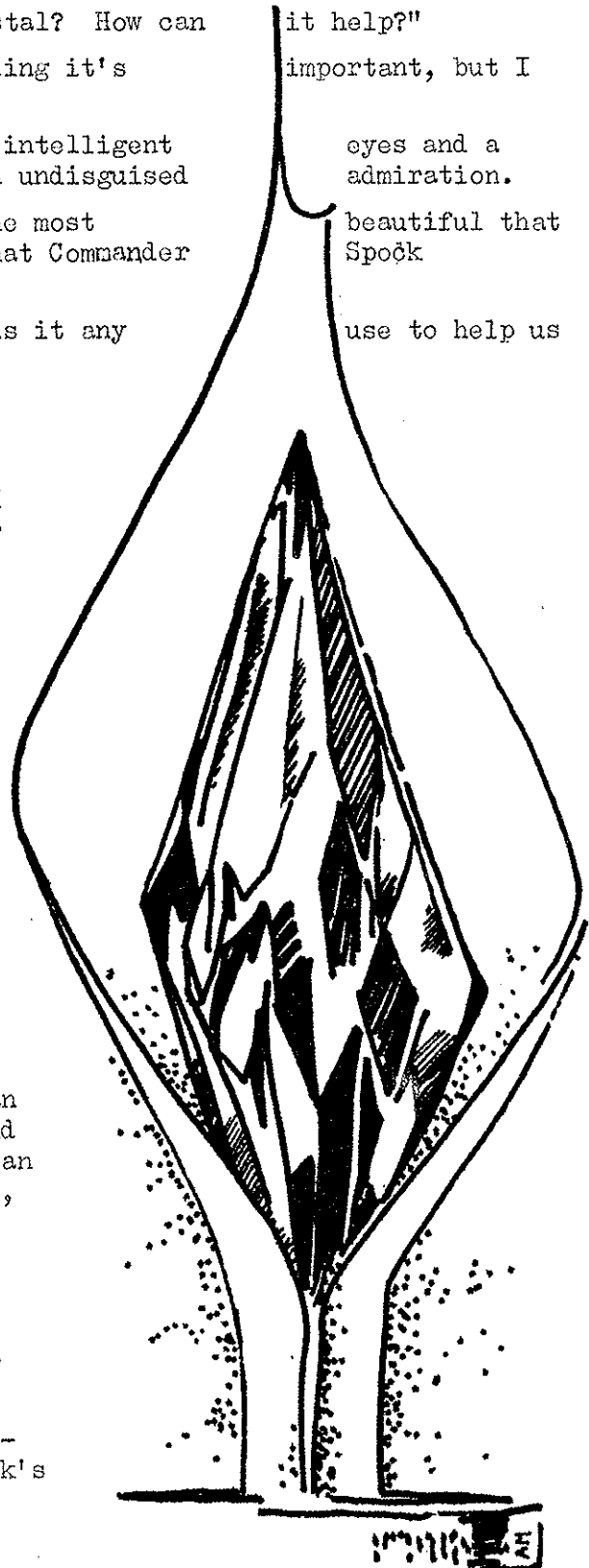
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use to help us



"He would not and could not, Captain. Please believe me, I know."

"Isn't there any other way of reading that crystal?" asked McCoy.

"Yes, Doctor, but it'd no use either. There is another kind of Vulcan crystal which, if in contact with this one, would enable a very sensitive sensor to record the thoughts trapped in its depths, but no such crystal can be found anywhere except on Vulcan!"

"Nevertheless we must get one," said Kirk. "It's our only hope."

"You wouldn't be able to get one, their scientific use is rigorously controlled and no outworlder would ever be granted permission to buy one."

"Then can't we make one?"

"I don't know... We would have to discover its composition first..."

"I may be able to find out," said Dr. Roland. "I'm on good terms with the Vulcan Embassy staff here and have permission to look up scientific records. I could try if Dr. Tai Wan gives me details of what to look for, but I can't promise anything."

Kirk had to leave it to the two scientists to do their best and Dr. Roland called him back after a couple of hours. "We were able to get the information without arousing suspicion, Captain, but it's not very hopeful; our chances of duplicating that crystal are poor. However, it's a challenge we'll take up and work on. Commander Spock is giving my staff excellent training in tackling nightmarish problems!"

* * * *

It was shortly afterwards that Commodore Maynard called in his usual irate condition. "Captain Kirk, I have had enough! That Vulcan of yours is now responsible for Dr. Roland's resignation, and the whole team is threatening to resign in order to do some private work in connection with him! This affair is reaching such proportions that I am ordering your departure within three hours. Perhaps everyone will then come to their senses and forget that Vulcan!"

"Three hours is hardly time..."

"That's my last word."

Kirk called Dr. Roland. "Sir, I'm sorry about your resignation..."

"Don't worry about that, Captain, I've resigned at least six times since my nomination here, every time I do work Commodore Maynard doesn't approve of, in fact! He has no intention of accepting my resignation, or that of any member of my team."

"I'm relieved to hear it. How is the work progressing?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. We'll let you know."

Kirk, knowing what a slim chance of success the scientists had, discussed possible other ways of finding the truth with his officers, but they came up with nothing and Mr. Scott reported, "We took the ship literally apart again, sir; my men are exhausted."

"We looked at every record and took each computer apart," said Rand. "There's nothing to find, sir."

"Then our only hope is that crystal, and a very slim hope it is!" sighed McCoy.

* * * *

It was about three hours later that Dr. Roland and Dr. Tai Wan beamed up carrying a small crystal and the memory crystal with great care.

"So you did it!" exclaimed Kirk exultantly.

"We don't know, Captain," said Dr. Roland. "We had to use three substitutes

in its composition, so it may not work at all."

They went to the briefing room and put the two crystals on the table, then Mr. Scott set up a very delicate sensor as Dr. Tai Wan said, "I must tell you that two of us tried and failed to read anything, so there's not much hope. Is there anyone here who has an affinity with Commander Spock? Who has merged minds with him before?"

"I do," said Kirk.

"Then you should be the one to try, Captain, but please stop if you feel any discomfort; that crystal we made is not perfect."

"Take care, Jim," begged McCoy.

"Yes, I'll take care. Let's get on with it," said Kirk with impatience.

"What will happen is this, Captain," explained Dr. Tai Wan, "you will operate the sensor and direct it at the Vulcan crystal through the one we made. Concentrate on thoughts of your Commander - it will, to speak in very simplified language, put the sensor on the right wave length, and whatever the sensor reads will be recorded on to a tape we can listen to afterwards. You may see or understand little, but that does not matter, it will be on tape."

"Captain," added Dr. Roland, "I know how short of time you are, so Dr. Tai Wan and I could listen to the tape as it is recorded. We would then afterwards be able to play back only the important parts."

"By all means, Doctor, you are very welcome."

The Captain followed the instructions under McCoy's and Scotty's worried eyes, remembering the last mind meld with Spock and concentrating on the crystal. He sensed something familiar responding, but it was vague and indistinct, and he soon felt some strain, but was able to keep on with his task, unaware however of the value of the recording. Whatever he sensed or saw was like a blur through a red mist. To keep his eyes open became painful, while his head started to ache, but Kirk never wavered in his determination to see this through. He lost track of time and hung on with a fierce determination to bear the strain he was under, no matter how painful it became.

At last, with relief, he felt the sensor being taken from him, and rubbed his eyes, pushing away McCoy's concerned hands.

"Any success?" he asked eagerly.

Dr. Roland and Tai Wan were taking their ear plugs off and nodded, and Dr. Roland said with undisguised emotion, "Success at last, Captain, and I am very happy for your sake and Commander Spock's."

Kirk was weak with relief and put his head in his hands to listen to the tape, feeling like crying with joy when he heard the well-known voice.

"I expect Jim will be thorough and investigate my personal log. What he discovers in it should cool his eagerness to search for the truth, if McCoy has not convinced him as yet. This crystal is the only silent witness of my thoughts I can trust, and to confide in it through this difficult period of my life is a relief and a strengthening of my resolution."

When Captain Laung handed me two tapes, I sensed something was wrong, and he was delighted to tell me that the extra tape was my nomination as Captain of the Enterprise. Then a third tape arrived which gave me the worst shock: Captain Kirk was assigned to take charge of Starbase 10, become one of those 'pon-pushers' he hates so much.

I knew then what I had to do and was thankful for Captain Laung going on leave. After destroying the two tapes, I went to Commodore Maynard and put in my application for Captaincy, knowing that Starfleet HQ would assume it had been put in before their nomination and grant it by return. The first step was taken to antagonise the crew and from then on my plan was simple. The second step was

to occupy the Captain's cabin (may Jim forgive me, I hated such an invasion of his privacy), then my efficiency drive started, meant to 'drive everyone crazy', as the Earth expression says."

There was a gap in the tape, then Spock's voice went on.

"What could be called my 'hate campaign' is going quite well, but McCoy is still unsure about me. When dealing with illogical minds, extreme measures have to be considered, provided the safety of ship and crew are never endangered. Some officers are reluctant to condemn my efficiency drive, also, so I have no choice, and time is short, or I would not have started my hate campaign so soon."

Dr. Roland stopped the tape. "The next part is your Commander's most ingenious plan."

He went on to explain briefly how Spock had first carefully calculated a nearer but safe orbit to observe the black sun, leaving a small margin of safety to allow for the decaying of orbit. A master tape in auxiliary control had been inserted, making the orbit decay, then restoring it. Another master tape had maintained the ship in orbit, making it appear trapped, again a temporary effect, and all the time there had been no danger to the Enterprise or crew, a couple of safety devices having also been inserted just in case.

"A most clever plan, Captain, and as Science Officer it was simple to operate for your Commander Spock. To make the orbit appear unsafe and his error was child's play."

"Why did he have to go to the auxiliary control room?" asked Kirk.

"To remove the safety devices he had installed; they could have been easily found."

"But he was away longer - and what about the two dead men?"

"Yes, Captain - we will now hear the rest of the tape."

Spock's voice took over, but a different tone was immediately noticeable, tired, sometimes faint.

"Everything went according to plan except for the unpredictable. I was about to leave auxiliary control for the bridge when I smelt acrid fumes from the ventilator through to the power plant, the next room to auxiliary. I deeply regret that I was unable to save the two men, but they were already dead when I entered. The power plant room was full of coolant fumes and I struggled through the smoke to find the leak, fortunately not large, but nevertheless deadly to Humans had it seeped through the ship. Obviously the two crewmen had been unaware of the danger and breathed the fumes in until it was too late, and unable to give the alarm before they died. I made hasty repairs to cover the unforeseeable accident, including a safety device I could remove later when I made the proper restoration so that nothing could be discovered. Trust the good doctor to bother me at such hectic times with irrelevancies like a court martial! I decided to take advantage of the men's deaths. I could not have them die of poisoning, so I broke their necks against a steel column, then I would probably be held responsible and it would 'put the final nail in my coffin' as I believe the Earth expression says.

I could not be found in the power plant and ran back to the auxiliary control room where I had to be. I nearly did not make it, the pain in my head made me blind as I reached the computer station, but I managed to sit and apparently watch black sun pictures as Scott and Sulu came in. The blindness was only temporary, as I knew it would be, and after checking that the ship was safely in orbit, I went to the bridge for McCoy's hysterical reactions. My plan had worked, a court martial was promised for good measure, and I was glad of his anger, it stopped him from noticing how slowly I moved, afraid as I was of collapsing during a blind attack. He did notice it, but was not suspicious. Fortunately the next onslaught on blindness occurred in the lift when I was alone. Extreme care in my behaviour will be essential and I must

avoid sickbay of all my plans will be in ruins.

The persistent headaches and blind attacks will not make my work schedule easy when I have to make sure no trace of my tampering is ever found, and the scientific mission data has to be processed and ready. My involvement with saving Jim's command does not absolve me from my scientific duties...

The deaths of the two men have been attributed to my error as I expected, so my command test has duly failed. I did not mean to upset anyone further by not attending the burial, but I just couldn't spare the time, and could not afford to be seen in public should an attack of blindness or nausea seize me. The Doctor started to notice I was not well and ordered me to eat - the last thing I wanted - but to avoid sickbay I had to comply. Fortunately no-one was close enough to notice how little I ate, and I was able to hide the fact that whatever I consumed never did me any good, followed as my meals were by nausea.

I also deplored having to refuse helping Mr. Scott during the ion storm, but it would have been illogical when blindness could have stopped me from seeing most of the data."

There was another break in the tape, then the voice came on again, weak, the words pronounced with obvious effort.

"No trace of the truth will ever be found aboard the Enterprise, my task is done. Captain Arney will do the rest and destroy any tape at Starfleet HQ, so Jim will never know he was due to lose his command to become a 'pen-pusher' at Starbase 10. My Captain never deserved such injustice, due to some beaurocrat's inability to think logically, and Captain Laung will still be on leave long after all the proceedings are over. Jim may guess the truth; I hope he does not, for then it will be easier for him. McCoy will make him accept the apparent truth with time.

The court martial is an annoyance, I have little energy left and I had to raid McCoy's surgery for a stimulant. I cannot afford medical examination even at this late stage, but the court martial should be of short duration. I don't even have to pay much attention to the proceedings.

Afterwards is a void it would be illogical to think about yet; I will need far more strength than I now have to cope with it."

The tape ended and Dr. Roland switched it off, then got up noiselessly and left with Dr. Tai Wan. Silence prevailed in the briefing room as Spock's voice seemed to linger on. Kirk's head was cradled in his arms so that no-one could see his face. McCoy was staring at his hands, but his eyes were fixed and unseeing. Scotty, the only other officer present, pressed McCoy's shoulder lightly, then went out.

"Bones," said Kirk in a muffled voice. "That coolant - how does it affect Vulcans?"

The Doctor answered mechanically. "It gives them violent headaches, dizzy spells, temporary attacks of blindness, nausea, perhaps a slight fever. The effects last according to the dosage absorbed, but life is not endangered."

"Thank God for that!" whispered Kirk fervently. He lifted his head and unashamedly wiped his eyes, now master of his emotions. "Come, Bones - we have things to do."

McCoy's eyes focused on his Captain and he said brokenly, "He must have been in such pain, Jim, and I, a doctor..."

"Don't, Bones! He couldn't come to you for help without being found out."

"I told him he had no heart, made him eat! I told him I hoped he would know what hell was, and he was there already!"

"Stop it! You didn't know, and Spock would never bear you a grudge for behaving as he wanted you to, so forget..."

He was interrupted by Uhura's call. "Captain, Commodore Maynard wants to talk to you."

"Captain Kirk," said the officer with cold anger, "you should have left orbit five hours ago."

"Should I? Never mind, I... "

"Impertinence will hardly help your court martial, Captain, and... "

"Sir," interrupted Kirk, "proof of Commander Spock's innocence has been found."

"And you no doubt think that you are now safe from sanctions?"

"I don't know and I don't care, sir. What matters is the rehabilitation of my First Officer."

"Your proof had better be irrefutable, Captain, or it will not save you. The other two officers of the tribunal are here - please beam down immediately."

Kirk and McCoy beamed down with the tape, which was shown to the tribunal, after which the Commodore rubbed his forehead wearily. "That Vulcan's face had been haunting me since the court martial. But I don't understand how those tapes disappeared from Starfleet HQ, and if Captain Arnay... I can't believe it!"

"May I call him, sir? He may be back by now."

"Yes, by all means."

Arnay was back. Informed that everything was known, Captain Arnay smiled. "I'm glad to hear it, Captain Kirk."

"But why didn't you stop the court martial and tell the truth?" asked McCoy.

"I couldn't see any way out, no matter how hard I tried, Doctor. Commander Spock had told me everything in confidence, which meant I couldn't use it, and had also asked me to destroy the tapes here. I tried to persuade him to admit the truth, but had he done so, he was ranking Captain then, and would have automatically kept the rank, and the Enterprise, so it would have been 'illogical', as he pointed out. The only help I could give was to destroy the tapes here as he wished, and I made sure the lazy beurocrat who couldn't be bothered to look further for a Commander for Starbase 10 than a temporarily disabled Starship Captain would never pull such a stunt again."

"You did destroy the tapes!" exclaimed Commodore Maynard, appalled. "Do you realise the penalty for... "

"Yes, sir," said Captain Arnay simply. "And I would do it again for Commander Spock any time. It was an honour for me to meet him. You are perfectly entitled to press charges... "

"No," said the Commodore. "I have had enough of this whole business!"

Commodore Maynard looked dazed as he cut the communication. "That Vulcan of yours is dangerous, Captain Kirk. He destroys tapes here, and even manages to disrupt Starfleet HQ's efficiency by having tapes destroyed there too, and by a senior officer! But you were right to prove his innocence, Captain, fortunately for you - and fortunately for Commander Spock. It would have been a shocking waste for Starfleet to lose his services, mainly after the report about him I received from the Science Centre. Therefore your disregard of orders is overlooked and your journey to Deneb 3 cancelled. Commander Spock will be reinstated and Lt. Rand's appointment cancelled. Where is your First Officer?"

"I don't know, sir; my security force was unable to locate him."

"Not very efficient, are they? I'll put Starbase security on to it."

* * * *

During the search, the necessary formalities and communications with Starfleet HQ were dealt with concerning Spock's reinstatement, and Commodore Maynard handed Kirk the completed dossier.

"All in order, Captain, you have your First Officer back."

"Thank you, sir. But where is he?"

"I haven't heard yet, but... "

The Chief of Starbase Security reported then. No trace of the Vulcan had been found. Exasperated, the Commodore put the civil police and the military police on to it as well, without success. Spock was not to be found.

By now Maynard was practically tearing his hair out. "Look, Captain Kirk, when we find your First Officer, if we find him, take him away, PLEASE. When I think how an invisible Vulcan has created such havoc here, I fear to think what a visible one would do!"

Kirk smiled, but was now very worried. McCoy looked strained.

"Jim, you don't think he... "

"No, Bones, not Spock. He has too much courage for suicide, which is a waste and therefore illogical."

"Thank God for logic!" said McCoy fervently.

Kirk had to laugh. "If only Spock could have heard you!"

"Don't you dare tell him!"

* * * *

"Where can he be?" asked Kirk for the unpteenth time as the Security Officer from Starbase 3 came back tired out and admitting defeat once more.

"I might as well resign if that Vulcan isn't found soon!" said Commodore Maynard despairingly. "I'll soon have Starfleet HQ asking me why we've come to a standstill, and I can't tell them it's because we're all hunting one man! All available personnel are hunting, and yet... "

"Let's try logic," said Kirk. "It seems to work where Spock's concerned. Where was he seen last?"

"Court martial," said the Security Officer.

"No, he was taken back to the Security Building; McCoy and I saw him there. Where did he go afterwards?"

"I don't know. He was notified within half an hour that he was free to go and the necessary papers were delivered to him," Maynard said.

"Wait a minute. He threw us out because he was exhausted; he couldn't have gone far. Have you checked the Security Building?"

"Well, no," the Security Chief admitted. "It seemed the last place he was likely to stay... "

"That sounds like it!" said McCoy. "He was already exhausted, and we know he took a stimulant; once that wore off... "

They ran to the room and went in quietly. Spock had not made it as far as the bed, and was lying on the floor where he had fallen, his indomitable will having given way at last to physical exhaustion.

"I like that!" said McCoy. "We're driven to the edge of collapse for his sake, while he sleeps... "

"Bones," said Kirk angrily, "sometimes I wish you'd think before you speak!"

"I know, I know," replied McCoy with true contrition.

Kirk knelt down and cradled Spock's head gently on his knees, asking with sudden fear, "He's all right, isn't he, Bones?"

McCoy was running a quick check and nodded. "Yes, he needed rest and has been getting it. I can't tell without tests whether the coolant's effects are finished, but the worst should be over by now. He probably still needs rest though, he was exhausted to a degree which would have had you or me flat on our backs long before it made him give way. Now that I come to think of it, I don't think he slept or ate much since you were wounded, but he's becoming clever at hiding from me; I shall have to watch him..."

"Never mind now, we'd better get him back aboard without waking him if possible. See if you can find his blue shirt, Bones, the Captain's dress uniform was taken away after the court martial."

The Doctor searched, and only came up with the Captain's shirt Spock was wearing before the dress uniform.

"It doesn't matter, put that on him for now."

They beamed back aboard the Enterprise and took Spock to sickbay where McCoy confirmed that the coolant's effects were only residual and all Spock needed was further rest.

"Is it normal that he should stay unconscious in spite of being beamed up, Bones?"

"Yes, he's still suffering from exhaustion - that's all."

"Then let's put him in his own quarters so that he wakes up there!"

"Good idea, Jim."

They settled the Vulcan carefully and Kirk went to the bridge to see to the routine and await orders. "Maintain orbit, Mr. Sulu. Smoothly, please, we don't want to wake Mr. Spock."

"No, sir," smiled Sulu, thinking that surely such a request had never been made on a Starship before!

Kirk left for Engineering soon afterwards. Before long his consideration for Spock was rendered useless by a small fast vessel which nearly collided with the Enterprise. Sulu shouted a warning into the intercom and took quick evasive action. The sudden manoeuvre threw Spock out of bed roughly on to the floor, giving him a hard awakening.

He stared at his surroundings, then shut his eyes and opened them again. He got up slowly, stiff and weak-legged after the prolonged immobility, and fear appeared in his gaze as he saw the Captain's shirt he was wearing. Trying to run was hopeless, but he managed to walk to the lift and then to the bridge, where his eyes searched for Kirk, unsuccessfully.

Uhura saw him first and exclaimed, "Mr. Spock!"

McCoy looked up as Spock descended the few steps unsteadily and took his arm. "Come and sit down, you'll feel better when the stiffness has gone - what are you doing up?"

Spock was still looking round unbelievably, and asked, "Where is the Captain?"

"Not far," said McCoy. "Sit down or you'll fall."

The command chair was the nearest and McCoy led him to it, but Spock recoiled violently and nearly fell, then pushed the Doctor's helping hand away roughly. His eyes stared at McCoy and the Doctor stepped back from their angry expression as Spock said in a voice that nearly shook, "I am not Captain of this ship!"

He was by then standing behind the command chair, and had to grip its back at the sudden onslaught of headache and blindness, just as Kirk arrived on the bridge and ran to his First Officer. With McCoy's aid he helped him to the chair and made him sit down.

"The attack will be brief," said McCoy reassuringly. "Only a residual effect from the fumes."

Spock's eyes cleared and he met Kirk's concerned gaze. "Jim!" he whispered, his face relaxing.

Then he noticed where he was sitting. Only one explanation was possible. They knew it all and had given him back the Captaincy of the Enterprise. Kirk was amazed, then alarmed, to see Spock's mask slip slightly as his hand was gripped and the First Officer whispered, "Jim, no, please."

"What's wrong, Spock?" asked Kirk gently. Then, urgently, "Bones, take him to sickbay. I'll help you."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain?" repeated Spock in a dazed voice.

McCoy injected the Vulcan who slumped into Kirk's arms and the Captain looked at the Doctor unbelievably. "Have you gone mad?"

"No, Jim," said McCoy sourly as he helped to take the patient to sickbay. "Spock's right - I am sadly lacking in logic."

"I don't understand," said Kirk, completely at a loss.

They settled Spock comfortably and the Captain asked with a sudden stab of fear, "Bones, is he ill? What happened?"

"He should have been kept here in the first place, and watched."

"Then he is ill!"

"No, but he's not well either. Take that Captain's shirt off him for a start, he shouldn't be wearing it!"

"Why? What does it matter? You don't think I care what he wears, do you?"

"Waking up in his cabin after the court martial was a shock, as well as discovering that he was wearing Captain's uniform again. He came to the bridge and you weren't there. Like an idiot I said the Captain wasn't far away and took him to the command chair. He could only have assumed that we'd found out everything and got him the Captaincy of the Enterprise back. Then after his blackout you were there, but he was sitting in the command chair. Again he could only assume that he'd been reinstated as Captain. When I called you 'Captain', he tried to adjust, but it was better to sedate him."

"But Vulcans..."

"These headaches weakened his mental control as well as his physical

health, and he should have had a careful transition instead of brutal shocks! A normal healthy Vulcan would have taken all that in without batting one eyelid, but he isn't back to health yet."

"No. I should have thought too, Bones, and spared him this. What's the best way to help him now?"

"Get him to meld with you when he wakes up - that is, if you can bear the cold, logical..."

"There are times, Dr. McCoy," said Kirk coldly, "when I know Spock is right about your illogical mind!"

"I expect he is!" replied the Doctor with a sigh.

Kirk had to smile; you could never be angry with McCoy for long! The Doctor was arranging a tray of food by the bed. "God knows when he kept anything down last, he's probably starving on top of everything."

Spock moved and Kirk bent over him anxiously as the Vulcan opened his eyes. "How do you feel now?"

"Slightly sick. It is either McCoy's drugs, or..." He stopped in time and Kirk nodded.

"Yes, I know. You've been asleep or unconscious since the court martial, and a lot has happened, but you'll be better soon, according to McCoy."

"Provided you get this down you," said the Doctor, pushing a spoonful of plomik soup into his mouth.

Spock swallowed it but protested, "I will not be fed, Doctor. Don't you have other patients to torment?"

"No, and you must eat. You'll feel better..."

The Vulcan resolutely clamped his lips together and Kirk stopped McCoy, took the bowl and presented the spoonful to Spock, who in sheer astonishment opened his mouth.

"Good! Carry on, Jim. Really, Spock, only a Captain is good enough for you now."

Spock seized Kirk's arm to stop the feeding and stared at the two identical gold-braided sleeves.

"Snap!" said Kirk with a smile. "Come on, Spock, get that soup down you - and that's an order!"

"I don't have to take orders from an officer of similar rank, Captain."

"I told you to take that shirt off him!" exclaimed McCoy.

Spock was nevertheless eating the soup, which proves how much he needed it, thought Kirk with a tightening of his throat.

"Listen, Spock, you're not Captain of the Enterprise, you're the First Officer," he said.

Spock pushed away his now empty soup bowl and started on the next dish, showing no reaction, and McCoy smiled contentedly. The Vulcan was eating and assimilating shocks better now.

Then Kirk proposed the mind meld, which made Spock look up sharply. "So that's it! Captain, my mind is my own and..."

"No, Spock," said Kirk patiently. "The idea is to show you my mind. We know all that happened."

Spock's eyebrows rose. "You wouldn't be trying to trick me, would you, Captain?"

"No!" snapped Kirk in exasperation, but he met McCoy's reproachful gaze and calmed down. "Your reinstatement as First Officer is in the records."

"And next time you set us a problem, Spock," said McCoy, "Please make it easier! We're all tired out, thanks to you!"

Spock was watching them with a remaining doubt. "Doctor, your report on my command was genuine, I do know that much."

"Must you remind me?" said McCoy, looking away. "Do you think I'm proud of it?" He came to the bed to take the empty tray away, and added with mock harshness, "And if the effects from that coolant's fumes bother you again, come here and get help - or are you trying to make my job redundant, going about in pain and never telling me?"

"You do know!" said Spock, unable to suppress a note of stupefaction.

"The mind meld?" asked Kirk with a smile.

Spock reached out and touched his Captain's face gently and Kirk relaxed into the now familiar merging of minds, but set his features into impassivity. Whatever took place now was too personal, and he did not want to betray the slightest part of Spock's inner mind. Afterwards, the Vulcan got up saying he felt much better and McCoy had to agree that the readings indicated improvement.

"I should never have left any record at all," said Spock thoughtfully.

"What? Then you wouldn't be here, Spock. Don't you want to be First Officer of the Enterprise?" asked McCoy.

"Irrelevant, Doctor. I should have considered the logical possibility that someone would find a way to tap the crystal, and it was also logical to assume..."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed McCoy, putting his hands to his ears. "Do we really want him back, Jim?"

Kirk laughed, things were back to normal. "Spock, now you can get your own uniform back on - the crew might get confused otherwise!"

"Yes, Captain."

"You could be wearing Captain's uniform if you wanted to - the first two orders were a mistake in Commodore's Mendez' absence, but your application for command was approved by Mendez in person; he was delighted that you wanted to be Captain at last. So you see, any time you want command, you have only to ask!"

"No, thank you, Captain. During the last journey, I had to waste time on command and was unable to concentrate on the scientific work exclusively - a great pity!"

"You did an excellent job, Spock, but if that's how you want it, I'm the last person to complain! I'm even selfish enough to hope you won't change your mind in the near future. Now, I'm taking McCoy to my cabin for a celebration drink - please, join us when you're ready."

They watched him leave and the Captain asked, "Is he fit enough, Bones?"

"For routine, yes, provided he doesn't stay too long on duty at once. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him."

* * * *

In the Captain's cabin, Spock accepted a drink for the occasion as McCoy asked, "Why didn't you come and tell me, Spock?"

"It... was not necessary, Doctor."

"You would never have put Spock through that willingly," Kirk translated.

"And you are far too emotional, Doctor," added Spock. "The crew would have suspected something at once."

"Nonsense, I can hide my feelings if I want to."

"The trouble, Doctor, is that you never do want to."

"Why should I? I have nothing to hide - not like some people I know who are ashamed of decent feelings."

"Definely back to normal!" Kirk laughed.

"Anyway, Spock, next time you get such a hare-brained scheme into your head... "

"Where does the brain of a small Terran mammal come in, Doctor?"

"You know what I mean!" replied McCoy impatiently as Kirk laughed again. "That scheme of yours wasn't logical anyway, and would have failed. Jim here wasn't going to leave Starbase 3 without you, even at the price of his command." He got up to leave.

"You had no right to say that, Bones," Kirk said angrily. McCoy shrugged, and went out, completely unrepentant. In the cabin, Kirk looked down to hide his embarrassment.

Spock said softly, "Don't be angry with McCoy, Jim - I knew."

"You knew? How? Oh yes, the mind meld, of course." Silence fell and Spock respected his Captain's thoughtful expression.

"I expect you know things about me that I can't see clearly myself," said Kirk at last. "Don't worry," he added hurriedly, seeing Spock's look of concern, "it no longer bothers me in the slightest."

"Why not, Jim?"

"Because I know you would never reveal what you see any more than I would tell anyone about your thoughts."

The Vulcan nodded understandingly and sipped his drink. Kirk lifted his glass to him. "I haven't even said 'Thank you', Spock, and I owe you so much... "

"Are all those words necessary, Jim?"

"No - you're right, you saw in my mind all there was to see." He finished his drink and continued, "Our next orders should arrive soon. Would you go to the bridge and occupy the command chair while I have a sleep, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I meant to ask McCoy for some pills - I think I'm too tired to sleep."

"May I be of assistance, Captain?"

"Yes, please. I don't like pills, your way is much nicer."

The Vulcan had his Captain relaxed into a soothing sleep within minutes and left the cabin quietly, nearly colliding with McCoy as he left.

"You look like a thief! I have to see Jim... "

"Not now, Doctor."

"Look, he went without sleep for days, he's overtired - he'll never sleep without a sedative."

"He is asleep, Doctor."

"Oh! I didn't think he'd be able to... Did you by any chance send Jim to sleep?" asked McCoy as they walked to the lift.

"Does it matter?"

"I never thought about it before, but Jim must be receptive to you after a mind meld... I hope you're not after my job," he added as they stepped out of the lift on to the bridge.

"No, Doctor, I have no wish to take up your profession."

"You sound as though you mean it! What's wrong with my profession?"

"Medicine among Humans obviously requires an illogical mind, or you would not be any good at it, Doctor. I do not qualify."

Uhura smiled and Sulu winked at Chekov. At it again! while McCoy went back to sickbay with a hidden smile. Spock was definitely better!

At Kirk's request, no-one on the bridge welcomed the First Officer with enthusiasm. It would have embarrassed him and it was more tactful just to accept him as one of themselves as they had done in the past.

About three hours later Kirk arrived, and Spock protested. "Sir, you should have had a longer rest!"

"I'm fine, Spock." Going to stand by the Vulcan at his station, he added in a low voice, "Your method of inducing sleep is particularly relaxing, Spock, I feel like a new man!"

"I am gratified, Jim," said Spock with the slight half-smile which showed in his eyes more than his lips. "Oh - the new orders have arrived."

They were discussing this when McCoy's arrival interrupted them and the Doctor said loudly, "Now, Spock, off the bridge! Haven't you finished with heroics yet?"

Every single officer stared at him with indignation written all over their faces and Kirk's look could have killed. McCoy's severe features relaxed into a beaming smile.

"Good! I see your low popularity is a thing of the past, Spock."

"Really, Bones!" exclaimed Kirk with a laugh.

"By the way - what are your thoughts on farming, Spock?"

"Why should I have any thoughts on farming, Doctor?"

"Well, Jim was going to take a farm if he was chucked out of Starfleet, with you as the brains, him as the brawn, and me as the vet."

"Indeed, Doctor?" replied Spock, one eyebrow raised. "Then some poor defenceless animals have had a fortunate escape!"

Laughter was general and McCoy ordered Spock to sickbay for a checkup with mock anger.

They were reaching the lift when Kirk hurried after them. "There's something I forgot to say, Spock - something you told me often."

"What is that, Captain?"

"Welcome home, Spock."

"Thank you, Jim."

"And welcome to sickbay!" said McCoy, dragging the Vulcan away among renewed laughter, as Kirk settled into his command chair with a smile.

It was good to be home.
